



## MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CHAIRPERSONS OF COSAC

NAMUR, BELGIUM, 14 - 15 JANUARY 2024

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## **PROCEEDINGS**

IN THE CHAIR: Ms Eliane TILLIEUX, Co-Chair of the Federal Advisory Committee on European affairs, Belgian Chambre des représentants/Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers and Mr Gaëtan VAN GOIDSENHOVEN, Co-Chair of the Federal Advisory Committee on European Affairs, Belgian Sénat/Senaat

### **OPENING SESSION**

#### **Opening remarks**

Ms TILLIEUX began by noting that on 27 December 2023 the former President of the European Commission, Mr Jacques DELORS, had passed away, and invited everyone to observe a minute of silence in commemoration.

She then went on to welcome delegations to Namur, the capital of the Belgian region of Wallonia. She explained that the Presidency chose to organise several interparliamentary conferences outside of Brussels in order to bring the European Union (EU) and citizens closer together. She invited participants to take the opportunity to explore the city of Namur, which is also the seat of the Parliament of Wallonia and the regional government of Wallonia. She underlined that in the Belgian federal system, the regional level has far-reaching competences and may offer its views on the application of the principle of subsidiarity and proportionality on proposals from the European Commission within those competences. Furthermore, she pointed out that the regional parliaments would organise three interparliamentary conferences during the Belgian Presidency.

For the LXXI COSAC meeting in Brussels, the Presidency had chosen amongst other topics, the Rule of Law and gender equality. Ms TILLIEUX underlined that the European model is based on common values under threat by the war in Ukraine, a situation which required action. The Rule of Law is a precondition for democracy, keeping Europe together, and necessary for a functioning single market. Equally, she noted that the equality between men and women had been a goal pursued by the EU for over 50 years. The Belgian Federal Parliament engages actively in aiming to reduce structural inequality, she said, and hoped that by putting the topic on the agenda a process could be facilitated whereby all national parliaments could move toward greater gender sensitivity.

Thereafter she gave the floor to Mr VAN GOIDSENHOVEN, who also extended his welcome to all delegations. He went on to note that 2024 would be a year of elections, both to the European Parliament and in several Member States, including Belgium. He noted that the political situation in many Member States had changed since 2019, and expressed his hope that not only problems and challenges would be addressed throughout the election campaigns, but equally that the opportunities and chances the EU offers would become apparent. Let us convey a message of hope to citizens and those currently facing a war on our borders, he concluded. Regarding the Belgian Presidency, Mr VAN GOIDSENHOVEN

continued by noting that due to the upcoming elections, the events connected with the parliamentary dimension of the Presidency had to be grouped together early in the year. A total of eight interparliamentary conferences would take place. The LXXI COSAC plenary meeting on 24-26 March 2024 would be the last of these. As for the Meeting of the COSAC Chairpersons, he explained that three topics had been chosen for the sessions:

- Session I - The priorities of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU
- Session II - The European Pillar of Social Rights
- Session III - Enlargement and its impact on the future of the EU

Furthermore, Mr VAN GOIDSENHOVEN noted that at the upcoming LXXI COSAC, two other topics (in addition to the Rule of Law and gender equality, as already outlined by Ms TILLIEUX) would also be discussed, namely open strategic autonomy, and a review of the 2019-2024 European legislature and prospects for the Council's strategic agenda for 2024-2029.

#### **PROCEDURAL ISSUES AND MISCELLANEOUS MATTERS**

Ms TILLIEUX began by announcing some practical information, after which she extended her welcome to those chairs participating at COSAC for the first time, namely:

- Mr Francisco José CONDE LÓPEZ, Chair of the Joint Committee for European Union Affairs of the Spanish *Cortes Generales*;
- Mr Gusty GRAAS, Chair of the Committee on Foreign and European Affairs, Cooperation, Foreign Trade and the Greater Region of the Luxembourgish *Chambre des Députés*;
- Mr Michał KOBOSKO, Chair of the European Union Affairs Committee of the Polish *Sejm*.

#### **Results of the meeting of the Presidential Troika of COSAC**

Ms TILLIEUX then informed the delegations about the results of the Meeting of the COSAC Presidential Troika, noting the approval of the agenda of the Meeting of the COSAC Chairpersons, the approval of the outline of the 41st Bi-annual Report of COSAC, and the approval of the draft agenda of the LXXI COSAC.

Ms TILLIEUX proposed, in the light of the above, that the agenda of the Meeting of the COSAC Chairpersons should be approved. There were no objections, whereby the agenda was approved.

## **Draft programme for the LXXI COSAC Plenary Meeting**

Ms TILLIEUX went on to name the themes of the sessions of the LXXI COSAC, namely: Review of the 2019-2024 European legislature and prospects for the Council's strategic agenda for 2024-2029; Gender policy and the representation of women in parliament; Open Strategic Autonomy: competitiveness and resilience; and Democracy and the Rule of Law in Europe: the way ahead. She underlined that the Presidency would strive to achieve a balance among the keynote speakers between experts in the field, representatives from the EU institutions, and national parliaments. The Presidency would also strive for a gender balance among invited keynote speakers.

## **Outline of the 41st Bi-annual Report of COSAC**

Ms TILLIEUX furthermore briefly described the outline of the 41st Bi-annual Report of COSAC, which would be divided into three parts: the first chapter would be dedicated to a review of the 2019-2024 European legislature and prospects for the Council's strategic agenda for 2024-2029; the second chapter would be dedicated to gender policy and the representation of women in parliament; while the third chapter would be dedicated to the topic of democracy and the Rule of Law in Europe. She noted that the questionnaire would be sent to delegations on 17 January 2024 at the latest, with replies expected by 8 February 2024.

## **Letters received by the Presidency**

Ms TILLIEUX then explained that the following letters requesting invitations to attend the COSAC meetings were received by the Presidency before the Chairpersons meeting:

- 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*;
- Lord Peter RICKETTS, Chair of the European Union Committee, United Kingdom (UK) *House of Lords*;
- Ms Rrezarta KRASNIQI, Chair of the Committee on European Integration, Kosovo<sup>1</sup> *Kuvendi i Kosovës*.

These requests had been replied to favourably after a written consultation within the Troika.

Ms TILLIEUX also mentioned that the Presidency had received a letter from Mr Ștefan MUȘOIU, Chair of the Committee for European Affairs of the Romanian *Camera Deputaților*. The letter contained a request to put the issue of addictive design of online

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<sup>1</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.

services and consumer protection in the EU single market on the agenda of LXXI COSAC. In light of the advanced stages of preparation for LXXI COSAC Ms TILLIEUX proposed that the question should be passed on to the upcoming Presidency.

Ms TILLIEUX furthermore informed that the Presidency had received two letters from third parties. One letter was sent on behalf of EGMONT – Belgian Royal Institute for International Relations, jointly with the Trans European Policy Studies Association. The two institutions would like to organise a lunch debate as a side event to the LXXI COSAC, inviting around 20 representatives from national parliaments to discuss democratic innovation and the resilience of the EU. The lunch would take place on 26 March 2024 in Brussels. The second letter referred to was a letter from the President of the Italian Council of the European Movement (*Movimento Europeo*), Mr Pier Virgilio DASTOLI. It contained a request to organise a conference on the sidelines of LXXI COSAC to discuss the future of Europe, the Multiannual Financial Framework and the process of revising the Lisbon Treaty. Ms TILLIEUX informed delegations that the Troika would consider these letters after the Meeting of the COSAC Chairpersons.

Lastly, Ms TILLIEUX informed delegations that the Presidency had also received a letter from Ms Ivanna KLYMPUSH-TSINTSADZE, Chair of the Committee on Ukraine's integration into the EU of the Ukrainian *Verkhovna Rada*, in which she asked the Presidency to consider the possibility of issuing a statement at the forthcoming COSAC Chairpersons meeting, condemning the recent Russian attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure in Ukraine. Ms TILLIEUX explained that since the initiative to put forward a joint statement had not been made previously and no delegation had the opportunity of taking note of the proposed statement, the Presidency instead would like to give the floor to Ms KLYMPUSH-TSINTSADZE to put forward her views at this point.

Ms KLYMPUSH-TSINTSADZE thanked the Chair for the opportunity and went on to express her gratitude to all those who during these meetings have asked her how things are in Ukraine. She lauded the heroism of the Ukrainian armed forces and thanked for all the support the country had received, but argued that the support had to be stepped up. Our common efforts to protect the security and prosperity of the European continent, the EU and candidate countries need to be reinvigorated. She underlined that recent attacks by Russian forces on civilian targets and infrastructure in Ukraine had been particularly severe, and that this was the reason she had asked for a joint statement condemning these attacks.

#### **Any other business**

Mr Bastiaan VAN APELDOORN, Chair of the Committee on European Affairs of the Dutch *Eerste Kamer*, asked for the floor to bring to the attention of delegations that the Council Secretariat of the Council of the EU had decided that national parliaments in the near future will no longer have access to the so-called delegates portal, a tool which gives access to Council documents including so-called *limité* documents. He remarked that access to the delegates portal allows many national parliaments to effectively scrutinise their government's work in the Council. He referred to a draft letter by the Chair of the European Affairs

Committee of the Danish *Folketing*, Mr Niels Flemming HANSEN, addressed to the President of the Council and the Secretary-General of the Council Secretariat to ask them to reconsider the decision to revoke access by national parliaments to the delegates portal, and encouraged those chairs who wished to co-sign this letter to come forward.

## **SESSION I - PRESENTATION OF THE PRIORITIES OF THE BELGIAN PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EU**

**Session chaired by Mr Gaëtan VAN GOIDSENHOVEN, Member of the Belgian *Sénat/Senaat* and Co-Chair of the Federal Advisory Committee on European Affairs**

Mr Gaëtan VAN GOIDSENHOVEN, Belgian *Sénat/Senaat*, opened the first session by mentioning that Belgium had taken on the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU for the thirteenth time, at a time when the EU was facing significant challenges such as the consequences of Russia's illegal attack on Ukraine, the pandemic, the energy crisis, disinformation, extreme weather conditions, and conflicts in the Middle East. The Belgian Presidency's motto was "Protect, Strengthen, Anticipate", reflecting its determination to provide better protection for European citizens, strengthen cooperation, and prepare for the future. The Presidency's main priorities included defending the Rule of Law, democracy, and unity; enhancing competitiveness; pursuing a fair ecological transition; strengthening social and health programs; protecting individuals and borders; and promoting a global Europe.

Mr VAN GOIDSENHOVEN added that Belgium would also continue to offer unwavering support to Ukraine. As the Belgian Presidency was taking place at the end of the European institutional cycle, it aimed to contribute to a smooth transition to the next cycle, support the adoption of the 2024-2029 strategic program, and initiate discussions on the future of the EU.

**Address by Ms Hadja LAHBIB, Minister of Foreign Affairs, European Affairs and Foreign Trade, and the Federal Cultural Institutions**

Ms Hadja LAHBIB highlighted that the parliamentary dimension was seen as an integral part of the Presidency, expressing a keen interest in the role of parliamentarians in the upcoming months, especially in light of the European elections on 9 June 2024.

Addressing the challenges at this pivotal moment in European history, including geopolitical tensions and the need for a sustainable economic transition, Ms LAHBIB outlined the dual mission of the Presidency. Firstly, to finalise numerous legislative files, building on the previous Spanish Presidency's work. Secondly, to prepare for the future, focusing on the 2024-2029 Strategic Agenda and laying the foundation for the Union's future.

Ms LAHBIB underscored the importance of defending democratic values and the Rule of Law, aiming to enhance the efficiency of existing tools such as the dialogue on the Rule of Law and Article 7 procedures.

Six thematic clusters were highlighted in the Presidency program:

1. defending the Rule of Law, democracy, and unity;
2. strengthening competitiveness;
3. pursuing a just ecological transition;
4. reinforcing social and health programmes;
5. protecting individuals and borders, with a focus on migration and security;
6. promoting Europe on the global stage, including addressing geopolitical issues and strengthening ties with global partners.

Additionally, Ms LAHBIB emphasised the need to reform and prepare for the future of the EU, covering institutional reforms, common policies, and budgetary considerations. The importance of ongoing dialogue with candidate countries and their necessary reforms for potential integration was also stressed.

Ms LAHBIB highlighted the priorities for upcoming Council meetings, including a focus on Africa, the Rule of Law, and the defence of democracy. She also expressed her wish to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the 2004 enlargement during an informal Council meeting in April.

Concluding her speech, Ms LAHBIB emphasised the crucial nature of the upcoming 2024 election year and the role of European parliaments in protecting democratic processes. Ensuring citizens were well-informed to understand complex issues and resist populist narratives was deemed essential for the progress and innovation that the European continent represents. The role of national parliaments in safeguarding democratic values and bridging the gap between the EU and its citizens was underscored as crucial for a democratic and results-oriented European project.

#### **Address by Mr Guy VERHOFSTADT, Member of the European Parliament**

Mr Guy VERHOFSTADT expressed that it was an honour to address the audience in Namur as one of the initial events of the Belgian Presidency. Acknowledging the importance of parliamentary unity for EU's democracy, he thanked the Belgian Presidency for organising the event. Reflecting on his past experience as Prime Minister during the 2001 Belgian Presidency, he drew parallels between the challenges then and those faced by the EU today.

Highlighting the threats to democracy, particularly in Ukraine, Mr VERHOFSTADT emphasised the need for unity and addressed the impending enlargement of the EU. Drawing from past experiences, he stressed the necessity for reforms to prepare the EU for a larger number of Member States. Specific reform areas included addressing the unanimity requirement, creating a health union, enhancing the energy union, establishing a defence union, and strengthening democracy through subsidiarity and the role of national parliaments.

In referencing a report adopted by the European Parliament in November 2023<sup>2</sup>, Mr VERHOFSTADT explained the Parliament's request to the European Council to initiate an in-depth discussion through a convention on the future of the EU, utilising Article 48 of the Treaty on European Union. He highlighted the significance of involving national parliaments and the European Parliament in this convention to ensure a comprehensive discussion on necessary Treaty changes.

Concluding his address, Mr VERHOFSTADT underscored the urgency of launching this exercise, emphasising its crucial role for both national parliaments and the European Parliament.

### **During the ensuing debate, 27 speakers took the floor.**

Various speakers emphasised the crucial importance of **upholding European values and the Rule of Law**. Mr Francisco José CONDE LÓPEZ, Spanish *Cortes Generales*, expressed gratitude for the support received during the Spanish Presidency and stressed the need to continue work on the files outlined in the European Council's Granada declaration. Ms Matilda ERNKRANS, Swedish *Riksdag*, extended her appreciation for the Belgian Presidency's commitment to the Rule of Law and emphasised the continuous effort needed to address gender equality. Mr Jean-François RAPIN, French *Sénat*, underscored the need to address growing distrust of the general public towards the EU by bringing Europe closer to its citizens. Ms Ivanna KLYMPUSH-TSINTSADZE, Ukrainian *Verkhovna Rada*, appreciated the Belgian Presidency's focus on defending values, the Rule of Law, and democracy. She highlighted that the **war against Ukraine is a direct assault on the fundamental principles of the EU**. Ms. Rrezarta KRASNIQI, Kosovo *Kuvendi i Kosovës*, reiterated Kosovo's commitment to European values, urging fair treatment and recognition from the EU.

Several speakers underscored the importance of **EU resilience and competitiveness**. Ms Judit VARGA, Hungarian *Országgyűlés*, pledged support to Belgium's Presidency, emphasising Hungary's commitment to addressing EU competitiveness and demographic challenges. Stressing the importance of enhancing social aspects and territorial cohesion, Mr Ștefan MUȘOIU, Romanian *Camera Deputaților*, advocated for prioritising these in future EU strategic agendas as a way to combat unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion while ensuring a just, fair, and inclusive transition. He emphasised the role of these efforts in bolstering EU resilience, security, and long-term competitiveness. Mr Vasile DÎNCU, Romanian *Senat*, emphasised the importance of protecting values, strengthening internal capacities, and preparing the EU for the future. He highlighted the need for resilience, especially in the context of the upcoming European elections, which he described as a stress test for maintaining ambitious policies. Mr Reinhold LOPATKA, Austrian *Nationalrat*, underscored the importance of a strong, competitive, and resilient EU for economic growth. Mr Ján FERENČÁK, Slovakian *Národná rada*, expressed his approval of Belgium's focus on

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<sup>2</sup> European Parliament resolution of 22 November 2023 on [proposals of the European Parliament for the amendment of the Treaties](#)

competitiveness and the development of Europe's economic potential. Emphasising the need for greater flexibility and investments in areas like artificial intelligence, energy transformation, and technological autonomy, he welcomed Belgium's priority for a green and just transition. Mr Heikki AUTTO, Finnish *Eduskunta*, stressed the need to enhance Europe's competitiveness and strategic autonomy. He thanked the Belgian Presidency for emphasising competitiveness, advocating for deepening the single market and ensuring a level playing field.

The recognition of the **role of national parliaments** was a recurring theme and was mentioned, amongst others, by Mr CONDE LÓPEZ and Mr Charles GOERENS, *European Parliament*. Mr RAPIN underscored the essential role of national parliaments in addressing growing distrust and called for ensuring ethical rules and transparency at the European level. Mr Alessandro GIGLIO VIGNA, Italian *Camera dei Deputati*, voiced his concern regarding the excessive number of regulations issued by the European Commission, when compared to directives, emphasising that this undermined the role of national parliaments. Mr Kazimierz Michał UJAZDOWSKI, Polish *Senat*, also pointed out the importance of efficient mechanisms that respect the positions of all countries, emphasising the need for a balance between EU and Member States' structures.

Several speakers addressed the issue of **EU enlargement**. Mr GOERENS expressed gratitude to Mr VERHOFSTADT, backing the European Parliaments proposals for Treaty changes. He underscored **the need to fulfil the promises made to candidate countries**, ensuring freedom of the press, justice, a global presence, and security. Mr Domagoj HAJDUKOVIĆ, Croatian *Hrvatski Sabor*, highlighted that enlargement was a partnership between the EU and aspiring countries, urging intensified efforts to bring these countries closer to EU membership. Mr Jovan SUBOTIĆ, Montenegro *Skupština Crne Gore*, emphasised the need for simultaneous focus on internal EU reforms and broader policies, considering geopolitical and geostrategic realities. He pointed out the importance of revitalising the enlargement policy. He also expressed his hopes for positive signals towards Montenegro's EU aspirations.

Ms VARGA and Mr LOPATKA highlighted the 20th anniversary of the historic EU enlargement, noting the **importance of focusing on the Western Balkans**. Ms KRASNIQI underscored Kosovo's commitment to the promotion of sustainable peace in the Western Balkans and beyond, calling for collective efforts and EU member support.

The issue of **migration and security** was also prominently addressed. Expressing support for democracy and freedom, Mr LOPATKA emphasised the need for clear regulations in addressing illegal migration. Mr FERENČÁK highlighted the Slovak Republic's view on the importance of establishing detention facilities for migrants and reinforcing European borders through Frontex. Mr Anastasios CHATZIVASILEIOU, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, welcomed the prioritisation of migration by the Belgian Presidency, urging a focus on adjusting policies that affected citizens' daily lives and integrating civil protection mechanisms into key policies. Mr Murat Cahid CINGI, Türkiye *Büyük Millet Meclisi*, thanked Mr.

VERHOFSTADT for highlighting the security concerns of the EU and emphasised Türkiye's crucial role in the EU's defence system, citing its geopolitical and geostrategic importance.

Several speakers, including Ms ERNKRANS, Mr HAJDUKOVIĆ, Mr AUTTO and Mr DÎNCU, underscored the **importance of supporting Ukraine**. Mr Anton HOFREITER, German *Bundestag*, highlighted the gap between promised and delivered weapons and stressed the need for Europe, especially Germany, to fulfil its promises to avoid escalating the conflict. He urged prioritising armament and ammunition supply to Ukraine to prevent further escalation and safeguard European countries from being drawn into the conflict. Mr Hans WALLMARK, Swedish *Riksdag*, stressed the urgency of ongoing support, including weapons, financial aid, and humanitarian assistance, to prevent challenges in the region from persisting or worsening. Ms KLYMPUSH-TSINTSADZE called for collective support to ensure that Ukraine could overcome the challenges posed by the conflict and emphasised the need for the international community to hold Russia accountable.

Regarding the **situation in the Middle-East**, Ms VARGA and Mr CINGI appealed for peace and humanitarian aid. Ms Cinzia PELLEGRINO, Italian *Senato della Repubblica* also expressed her concern about Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea, emphasising the need for free and safe maritime circulation. She then stressed the EU and international community's role in avoiding tensions escalating in the region.

Several speakers expressed their **hope for successful collaboration and progress in the EU enlargement process**. Ms Maka BOTCHORISHVILI, Georgian *Sakartvelos p'arliament'I*, expressed her gratitude for the warm welcome and the firm and vocal support for Georgia's European integration. She acknowledged the challenges ahead but expressed confidence in moving forward with the support of the European family. Ms Doina GHERMAN, Moldova *Parlamentul Republicii*, highlighted the historical moment for Moldova and Ukraine, with the launch of accession negotiations by the European Council in December 2023, and conveyed deep appreciation for the substantial political, financial, and practical support from the European Commission and EU Member States. Ms Elvira KOVACS, Serbian *Narodna skupština*, argued that Serbia was solidly on the path to European integration, mentioning the significant progress in harmonising regulations and emphasising the need for candidate countries to engage in common market policies and leverage the EU market more effectively. Recognizing the changed geostrategic context, she assured that Serbia would gradually align its foreign and security policy with the EU's, aiming for full harmonisation by the end of negotiations.

## **SESSION II - THE EUROPEAN PILLAR OF SOCIAL RIGHTS**

**Session chaired by Ms Eliane TILLIEUX, Speaker of the Belgian *Chambre des représentants/Kamer van volksvertegenwoordigers* and Co-Chair of the Federal Advisory Committee on European Affairs**

Ms Eliane TILLIEUX opened the session by noting that the European Pillar of Social Rights was a priority of the Belgian Presidency. Further, she referred to the former president of the

European Commission, Mr Jacques DELORS, as a visionary who strove for a large single market and at the same time for a social Europe that protects employees. His initiatives played a decisive role in involving social partners in the progress of European integration. Despite the European social regulations and directives, there was a need for a compass and so the European Pillar of Social Rights was proclaimed in 2017. The Pillar set out twenty fundamental principles on equal opportunities, quality of work, social protection, and inclusion. The legislative measures which were launched after the Declaration of Porto in May 2021, reflected the effort for an equitable and inclusive Europe that fights for gender equality and access to fundamental rights.

Ms TILLIEUX noted that the trio (the presidencies of Spain, Belgium and Hungary) would continue its efforts to ensure the effective implementation of the action plan on the European social rights floor. During the Belgian Presidency, the issue of social dialogue would be at the centre of attention. The aim was to be able to define the European social agenda for the next legislature of the EU with the contribution of all Member States. Furthermore, the Belgian Presidency would push for progress on initiatives concerning fair labour mobility, mental health at work, access to sustainable social protection, and strengthening of the social dimension of the European Semester. A high-level conference would be held on 15 and 16 April 2024 in La Hulpe with the aim of setting out the broad outlines of Europe's social ambitions for the period 2024-2029.

Ms TILLIEUX drew the attention to the Meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC which could already give impetus to the exchange of views on the future of the European set of social rights as a fundamental element of European integration.

#### **Address by Mr Othmar KARAS, Vice-president of the European Parliament**

Mr Othmar KARAS, on behalf of the President of the European Parliament Roberta METSOLA, congratulated the Belgian Presidency on its work programme and the great importance it attached to the social pillar. Furthermore, he quoted Mr Pierre-Yves DERMAGNE, Belgian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy and Work, who referred to the European Pillar of Social Rights as a compass, providing a clear framework and direction. The future of the Social Pillar was the future of Europe itself, stated Mr KARAS.

Mr KARAS added that the main question would be who makes sure the social pillar is implemented. The goals of the Pillar would only be achieved if the European institutions, the old and new Member States, the regional and local authorities, the social partners and many other partners really work together. This was also expressed in the Lisbon Treaty, where "our way of life" included the European regulatory model of a sustainable social market economy. The market economy must act responsibly as regards social, sustainable and ecological questions. Mr KARAS stated that there could only be a functioning, competitive internal market if we removed the existing hurdles and obstacles to it and if we deepened and expanded it. The pandemic, the wars, the inflation, the challenges faced by Europe's citizens

and the issue of migration had shown how important it was for fundamental social rights to be seen as an essential pillar of the EU.

Mr KARAS insisted that Europe was never an either-or proposition, especially when it came to social issues. The question of what the common framework is and who does what to implement it, was the most important. Progress had been made in the intensified fight against poverty, discrimination and social exclusion. Mr KARAS furthermore referred to the progress made on the EU directives for appropriate minimum wages, for better protection of platform workers and for more wage transparency. The "European Child Guarantee" and "European Social Security Card" projects also remove obstacles for the exporting economy in cross-border business. Mr KARAS highlighted the importance of talking about this, and to keep in mind that economic success and social cohesion are dependent on each other. In this light he drew the attention to five areas of importance:

1. The seamless implementation of jointly agreed legislation and the European Pillar of Social Rights;
2. The anchoring of objectives and milestones of the European Pillar of Social Rights in the European Semester, for increased economic, social and employment policy coordination;
3. The importance of moving together from recommendations to legislation on European level, including by moving ahead with the proposals on reforming the EU Treaties and implementing the results of the Conference on the Future of Europe;
4. The adoption by the European Parliament of a resolution providing for the strengthening of the mandate of the European Labour Authority (ELA) in the implementation of European decisions;
5. The full implementation of resolutions adopted at the level of the International Labour Organization (ILO). The EU should be given the right to issue or adopt a verbatim directive to make these joint decisions enforceable.

Mr KARAS closed his speech by referring to the topic as sensitive, ideologically and practically, but one that needed to be addressed to find solutions.

**Address by Ms Bea CANTILLON, Professor emeritus in Sociology of the University of Antwerp**

Ms Bea CANTILLON opened her address by mentioning that she had contributed to work that was made during the Belgian Presidency in 2001 and the Laken Declaration on the future of Europe in the same year, which had been the basis of monitoring the implementation of the Social Pillar up until today. In the two decades since then, progress had been made, but the full implementation of the Pillar is still important for the EU to become a union of welfare states.

Ms CANTILLON went on to note that the Treaty of Rome provided virtually no European social powers: they were limited to gender equality, the guarantee of social rights for migrant workers and social funds. The founding fathers assumed that economic growth would

translate into higher wages and more social investment in each of the Member States individually. She added that economic convergence had been accompanied by upward social convergence. In the second half of the 1990s Europe had however changed its outlook, as a reaction to the currency union depriving the national welfare states of the tool of using exchange rates to maintain public social spending in times of crisis. Successive enlargements had also increased fears of social dumping, and the 2008 financial crisis, as well as Brexit, showed the disastrous consequences of the absence of a social role for Europe. Ms CANTILLON stated that these developments showed an increased economic and social divergence and a need for European cohesion through social citizenship.

Ms CANTILLON referred to the Lisbon Strategy in which common social goals are defined as convergence not through the harmonisation of social security, but around common goals related to employment and poverty reduction. The Laeken social indicators, the European statistical system to measure convergence around common social objectives, and the open method of social coordination were important steps in the new social convergence strategy. However, results were lacking, noted Ms CANTILLON. In most countries, remarkable progress on employment targets were not accompanied by a reduction in poverty. The common objectives were defined at a very high level of abstraction and were too vague to serve as a guide for policymakers. In terms of content, the strategy was also too one-sidedly focused on employment growth and social investment and a subordinate role for social security.

Following the events mentioned earlier, the European Pillar on Social Rights was therefore launched which, according to Ms CANTILLON, gave tangible shape to the social convergence strategy. The objective of reducing poverty was supported and specified through a policy strategy, namely the strengthening of citizens' social rights, in terms of quality work, adequate minimum wages, housing, and social protection. Secondly, the double importance of work and social protection was more balanced in the Social Pillar, as the third chapter deals with social security, adequate social benefits, affordable and adequate housing and social services. Thirdly, the Pillar's action plan very explicitly involved social funds in the implementation of social rights. Finally, by attaching concrete targets to the Social Pillar and by monitoring member states' policies through a set of well-considered social indicators, Europe's role as a regulator was also strengthened.

Ms CANTILLON concluded welcoming the inclusion of the European Pillar of Social Rights amongst the priorities of the Belgian Presidency.

### **In the debate that followed, nine speakers took the floor.**

The majority of the speakers **considered it to be positive that the European Pillar of Social Rights was included as a priority** during the Belgian Presidency. Ms Cinzia PELLEGRINO, Italian *Senato della Repubblica*, thought that in the revision of the Stability and Growth Pact, too much focus lay on economic aspects. Ms PELLEGRINO argued that this might undermine a social Europe, where there is a need to focus amongst other things on gender

equality and reducing the gender pay gap. Mr Anastasios CHATZIVASILEIOU, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, added that the EU had been given the power to pursue a robust social agenda in order to be a more inclusive, equal and equitable union. Therefore, he stressed the need to enhance the European social dimension and the need to empower and protect citizens. Ms Cristina MENDES DA SILVA, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, believed that the European Pillar of Social Rights is the answer to the many challenges the EU faces. Furthermore, the Pillar should be linked to the economic and political dimension. Ms MENDES DA SILVA asked how the Belgian Presidency would make sure that the European Pillar of Social Rights be prioritised.

On **implementation**, Mr Francisco José CONDE LÓPEZ, Spanish *Cortes Generales*, stressed the need to be realistic in order to achieve real social convergence in Europe. The Member States need to be able to implement all the objectives and this work is closely linked to enlargement. The EU must work harder to achieve a real health union and solve the imbalances, he argued. Mr Ján FERENČÁK, Slovakian *Národná rada*, appreciated that the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights were defined as recommendations. Ms PELLEGRINO added the need to focus on results. They both welcomed more flexibility for Member States. Mr Ștefan MUȘOIU, Romanian *Camera Deputaților*, believed it essential to strengthen the partnership between the European Commission and the Member States to ensure smart, targeted and efficient enforcement of legislation. Mr MUȘOIU noted that Romania endorsed the principles and rights established in the interinstitutional proclamation on the European Pillar of Social rights, but its implementation must be in line with competences resulting from the Treaties and ensure a more coherent action at the European level.

Furthermore, Ms PELLEGRINO referred to the issue of **minimum wages**, which was being discussed in the Italian *Senato della Repubblica* and argued that enforcing the directive on minimum wages would be unfair since the Italian collective bargaining system already provides equal if not higher safeguards than the directive provides for. Mr Jean-François RAPIN, French *Sénat*, indicated that respect for the subsidiarity principle is of the essence within the EU, but found it a pity to see how some Member States evoked the principle as a tool to prevent progress towards social cohesion. The French *Sénat* supported the draft directive on minimum wages and called for an ambitious plan. On 14 November 2022 the *Sénat* had also adopted a resolution regarding the draft directive on platform workers to support the need for a common legal framework.

Mr CHATZIVASILEIOU elaborated on the **need to reduce inequalities** through equal opportunities, equal access to the labour market, fair working conditions and social protection and inclusion. Furthermore, he stressed the need for investments in education, training, and the development of appropriate skills for the digital age. This would create opportunities for both employees and small and medium enterprises. Mr CHATZIVASILEIOU proposed an initiative to create working groups consisting of the social economic departments of the Member States to elaborate on positions and have an exchange of views. Ms MENDES DA

SILVA similarly underlined the need to exchange good practices and referred to existing social programmes and Portuguese initiatives.

Mr Alessandro GIGLIO VIGNA, Italian *Camera dei Deputati*, noted that the main focus in the last few years had been on the environmental issues and the green transition. He stated that a **balance between the green agenda and the aims of the Social Pillar** is essential; zero emissions and zero unemployment would have been a good goal.

Mr Sergio GUTIÉRREZ PRIETO, Spanish *Cortes Generales*, referred to the financial crisis in 2010, which ended with a Euro crisis and Brexit. He noted the change from a political defence of the European project to having many countries wanting to join. The EU **gained political strength**. Mr GUTIÉRREZ PRIETO noted the challenge in combining enlargement of the EU with a design of the EU that would take reinforced cooperation into account as a mechanism for building the EU, and allow us to overcome the risk of paralysis that enlargement would imply.

Mr FERENČÁK noted that the discussion should also reflect on **challenges in the labour market** such as industrial automatisisation, developing robotics and the use of artificial intelligence. Mr MUȘOIU underlined the importance of the development of a more skilled workforce, and addressing the needs of the labour market and promoting lifelong learning. Mr MUȘOIU noted that the social dimension can be a significant element to strengthening European competitiveness and an important part of the legal framework in the fields of social protection and promotion of human rights.

### **Closing remarks**

Mr KARAS noted that in spite of the different approaches, there was a consensus when it comes to a sustainable market economy and the strengthening of the single market. He noted that competitiveness and social cohesion should go hand in hand. Starting from this consensus, the reforming of the Treaties and the enlargement of the Union would make it possible to achieve a lot in the coming years.

Ms CANTILLON noted that as a non-parliament member, she was touched by the consensus that was heard throughout the debate on how important it is to support the social agenda and the European Pillar of Social Rights. She underlined that the Belgian Presidency would find support in bringing the Social Pillar closer to the economic dimension. Furthermore, she stressed that there should be a balance between the climate agenda and the social dimension. Climate monitoring should go hand in hand with social monitoring.

### **SESSION III - ENLARGEMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON THE FUTURE OF THE EU**

**Session chaired by Mr Gaëtan VAN GOIDSENHOVEN, Member of the Belgian *Sénat/Senaat* and Co-Chair of the Federal Advisory Committee on European Affairs**

Mr Gaëtan VAN GOIDSENHOVEN, Belgian *Sénat/Senaat* opened the third session and introduced the two keynote speakers. He noted that, twenty years after the EU's largest

enlargement in May 2004, enlargement continued to be an important tool to promote peace, stability and European values and norms in the continent and that Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine had brought enlargement to the top of the EU's agenda. He stressed that the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU supported EU candidate countries in their efforts to meet the accession criteria. He also noted that Belgium considered that any enlargement of the EU should be accompanied by the corresponding deepening, carrying out the necessary political, financial and decision-making reforms. He concluded by stressing the importance of the recommendations of the Conference on the Future of Europe and noted that the Belgian Presidency would promote discussions on the EU reforms necessary to welcome new Member States and to respond united to current and future challenges.

**Address by Ms Ivanna KLYMPUSH-TSINTSADZE, Chair of the Committee on Ukraine's integration into the European Union, Ukrainian *Verkhovna Rada***

Ms Ivanna KLYMPUSH-TSINTSADZE, Ukrainian *Verkhovna Rada*, thanked the Belgian Presidency for the invitation to speak on a matter of importance not only for the future of Ukraine but of the entire enlargement process and the EU as a whole. She noted that the December 2023 historic decision of the European Council to open accession negotiations with Ukraine provided for important, timely and merit-based support for the Ukrainian people. This decision, she stressed, followed from Ukraine's implementation of the seven recommendations made by the European Commission, which had been more than fully met and in a shorter time than expected. She noted that the opening of negotiations was a powerful motivation for further reforms, modernization and the restoration of Ukraine within the framework of the EU accession processes and on the basis of relevant standards. Ms KLYMPUSH-TSINTSADZE stressed that the European Council decision shaped the future not only of candidate countries, but also of the enlargement process and of the EU itself. In that sense, she stated that enlargement itself is the EU's future, as a widening of the European space of values, freedom, prosperity and security. The enlargement process in itself would require some institutional reforms, which, she hoped, would be addressed with flexibility and openness.

Ms KLYMPUSH-TSINTSADZE noted that the decision to open accession negotiations had already resulted in strategic changes that increased the geopolitical profile of the EU. She noted that Ukraine's bid for EU membership had reinvigorated the EU enlargement discourse and highlighted the need for a renewed vision and commitment. In light of the growing Russian threat to European peace and stability, an enhanced enlargement policy, she noted, remained the strongest geopolitical tool at the EU's disposal. Enlargement would also mean an increase in the economic global profile of the EU, but this should not lead to economic protectionism by current EU Member States. Instead, she noted, enlargement negotiations needed to be carried out with good will, not with a zero-sum mentality but with a win-win and positive one.

Ms KLYMPUSH-TSINTSADZE welcomed the start of discussions on EU reform, but stressed that reforms should take place in parallel to enlargement and to those reforms carried

out by candidate countries. EU reform, she noted, should not limit the enlargement process nor become an obstacle in itself. In this regard, she noted as important tasks the need to identify and correct weaknesses in the current negotiating processes and to prevent the misuse of the unanimity principle in EU decision-making. She stressed that Ukraine was not asking for exceptions or a fast track to accession: all candidate countries needed to fulfil the accession criteria but it was important to maintain political commitment, engagement and momentum on both sides.

Ms KLYMPUSH-TSINTSADZE underlined the important security dimension of enlargement for the future of the EU. After decades of neglecting its own security and defence - relying instead on the United States - the current geopolitical context had laid bare, in a brutal manner, the shortcoming of this EU approach. As the world was entering a period of international turbulence the EU needed to invest in its own defence. In this context, she stressed that Ukraine mattered for the EU as much as the EU mattered for Ukraine. The next enlargement would not be a standard enlargement, she noted: it would not only be important for the candidate countries but for the EU itself. She issued a call to grasp the opportunity and to create an EU that was a beacon of democracy, freedom, prosperity, security and unity.

#### **Address by Ms Ramona Coman, Professor in Political Science at the Université Libre de Bruxelles**

Ms Ramona COMAN, Professor in Political Science at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, thanked the Belgian Presidency for the invitation to speak and stated that the EU needed to carry out reforms, independently of its enlargement. She noted that a Treaty reform was important, not as a goal in itself, but as part of the political process of constructing the EU. She noted further that there was not only political awareness of the need for EU reform, in order to maintain the legitimacy of the European project, but there was also social support for enlargement. According to the Eurobarometer survey<sup>3</sup>, 53% of European citizens were favourable to European enlargement, even if there were geographic differences. The citizens of countries neighbouring Ukraine such as Lithuania or Poland, but also in Ireland, Spain or Croatia were most supportive of enlargement. Slovakia, Austria or Cyprus had the lowest level of support. Overall, a majority of citizens supported European enlargement in 19 countries; the opposite was the case in only eight countries.

Ms COMAN stated that the EU currently faced a crossroad with regard to reform, but that different valid routes were available. While some ideas for reform were outlined in the past, she also pointed to more recent proposals including those made by the Conference on the Future of Europe, by the European Parliament, or in the academic sphere. These were very different proposals with varying levels of ambition, feasibility, or timing, and were suitable to match almost all political visions; all were, however, endowed with one or another type of legitimacy. When identifying the concrete reforms to be carried out, Ms COMAN noted that it was essential to outline what was the ultimate goal and vision for the EU, and to

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<sup>3</sup> [EP Autumn 2023 Survey: Six months before the 2024 European Elections](#), published by the Public Opinion Monitoring Unit within the Directorate-General for Communication (DG COMM) of the European Parliament, Brussels, December 2023

accompany this with a defined method for the reform and a clear timeline. This recipe, she noted, had been used by former European Commission President, Jacques DELORS, in the construction of the European Single Market and could serve as inspiration for the enlargement and reform process.

Ms COMAN stressed that the balance between EU enlargement and deepening was more important than ever. She highlighted that three types of reform were necessary. The first were reforms allowing the EU to respond to the needs and expectations of its citizens and to function with more than 27 Member States. The question of institutional reforms linked to the growing number of EU Member States, she noted, had been on the agenda for a long time, with limited results. In the current moment, she highlighted, a further enlargement of the EU without a deep reform would lead to a dilution of the European project. This risk was actually present even without an enlargement, given that the *ad hoc* manner in which the EU responded to different crises had led to a dilution of its legitimacy in the eyes of citizens. As an example, Ms COMAN cited that an EU of 27 Member States should favour decisions taken by qualified majority. The unanimity requirement, and notably, the possibility that a single Member State could block a decision taken by all others, should be limited. She also highlighted the possibility to establish various status for different European countries, including the creation of a status of “Associate Member”, as proposed in the Franco-German expert report.<sup>4</sup> Some thought should be given also to the EU’s institutional set-up, for example the size and functioning of the European Commission, but this, she noted, was of lesser importance at this stage.

Ms COMAN then highlighted a second type of reforms that were necessary to allow the accession of new Member States to the EU as well as their continued respect for EU values once they had become part of the EU. The Copenhagen Criteria, and the values enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty and in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights were, she stressed, the only ones that could guide the enlargement process. In addition to this clear political requirement, she noted also that the timeline for enlargement had to be a credible one to build trust on the process and to create the necessary motivation for accession in candidate countries. A third type of reforms, linked to this point, and listed by Ms COMAN, were those internal EU reforms seeking to ensure continued respect for EU values and, notably, a reform of Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union.

As a final point, Ms COMAN again underlined the importance of the method chosen to carry out the reforms. Deep EU reforms needed to be endowed with the legitimacy not only of Member States, but also of European citizens. While it was possible to carry out some of the reforms via a simplified method for the revision of the Treaty, she noted that this more technical and simple path of reform did not exclude a more ambitious one. Only a Convention, involving national Parliaments, would provide the democratic legitimacy that would allow the EU to succeed in the deepening of its reforms and in its enlargement to new Member States. The current Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU - coming also right

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<sup>4</sup> [“Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century”](#), Report of the Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform, Paris-Berlin, 18 September 2023

before the European elections - was, she stressed, the right time to start reflecting on this important matter.

**During the ensuing debate, 25 speakers took the floor.**

All speakers agreed on the **importance and value of enlargement for the EU and agreed that it should continue**. Ms Cinzia PELLEGRINO, Italian *Senato della Repubblica*, welcomed the historic decision by the European Council on 14 December 2023 to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and to grant Georgia candidate status, and stated that enlargement - which should be accelerated also in the Western Balkans - was a geopolitical investment in the liberty, security and prosperity of the EU and neighbouring countries. Mr Anton HOFREITER, German *Bundestag*, clearly stated that, in light of the important challenges faced by the EU, enlargement was a need, not an option. Mr Jean-François RAPIN, French *Sénat*, also noted that the question was not “whether” but “how” to enlarge the EU to candidate countries in the East as well as in the Western Balkans.

Various speakers underlined **the nature of the EU as a peace project that needed to be completed, and that enlargement would contribute to the continent’s stability**. This was mentioned by, among others, Mr Christian BUCHMANN, Austrian *Bundesrat*, Mr Domagoj HAJDUKOVIĆ, Croatian *Hrvatski Sabor*, Mr Anastasios CHATZIVASILEIOU, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, and Ms Cristina MENDES DA SILVA, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*. Ms Maka BOTCHORISHVILI, Georgian *Sakartvelos p'arlament'i*, noted that Russia’s aggressive stance against its neighbouring countries had made clear the pressing need for strategic EU enlargement. Mr Hans WALLMARK, Swedish *Riksdag*, also emphasised that EU enlargement was about security, stability and EU values, and contrasted the threat posed by Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine with the positive impact EU enlargement had on the stability of the Nordic and Baltic regions, especially in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia 20 years ago.

The **specific situation of Ukraine, an EU candidate country facing a war of aggression**, was mentioned by various speakers, including Mr HAJDUKOVIĆ and Mr HOFREITER. Ms Radvilė MORKŪNAITĖ-MIKULĖNIENĖ, Lithuanian *Seimas*, stressed that a safe and strong Ukraine was a common key interest for the EU, and called for the revenue generated by Russian frozen and immobilised assets to be used to provide additional resources for Ukraine’s reconstruction, thus also reducing the costs for the EU budget. Mr Kazimierz Michał UJAZDOWSKI, Polish *Senat*, noted that EU enlargement for Ukraine was a specific case due to the imperial war waged by Russia against Ukraine, and called for a strong EU response in reaction to this. Mr Gusty GRAAS, Luxembourg *Chambre des Députés*, underlined that the war in Ukraine was a clear example of the need for a more united and stronger EU. Mr Peter RICKETTS, United Kingdom *House of Lords*, also noted that Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine was the most serious challenge to European security since the end of the Cold War and stressed that Ukraine’s accession to the EU - together with Moldova, Georgia and countries in the Western Balkans - would be a huge strategic shift in the direction of greater European security and stability. Ms Denitsa SIMEONOVA, Bulgarian

*Narodno sabranie*, called for stepping up the EU enlargement process to build an area of democracy and security, and for continued support to Ukraine. Mr CHATZIVASILEIOU echoed the call for maintaining support for Ukraine in their war effort, as well as for the country's accession to the EU, but also underlined there should be no preferential treatment for the country.

Ms Judit VARGA, Hungarian *Országgyűlés*, welcomed the discussion on EU enlargement, which, she said, would continue on the agenda of COSAC during the upcoming Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the EU. She noted that accession to the EU was usually a lengthy process and stressed that Hungary had been one of the main supporters of the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans. Ms VARGA called for a **merit-based enlargement process for all candidate countries, without any fast-track procedure and without any double standards**. The same message - while also emphasising the need for EU enlargement in the Western Balkans - was made by Mr RAPIN, Ms PELLEGRINO and Mr CHATZIVASILEIOU. Various speakers, among others, Mr GRAAS and Mr Ján FERENČÁK, Slovak *Národná Rada*, underlined the importance of **respecting the Copenhagen criteria for accession to the EU**. Mr Harris GEORGIADIS, Cypriot *Vouli ton Antiprosopon*, stressed that a prerequisite for accession to the EU should be respect for EU values and that, while compromise was often needed in EU decision-making, this was not possible when it came to relations with illiberal regimes. Mr HAJDUKOVIĆ stressed that accession criteria should be reliable and that rules could not be changed half-way through the accession process. He also called for the EU to provide support to candidate countries in order to help them meet the necessary criteria. This call was made also by Mr Francisco José CONDE LÓPEZ, Spanish *Cortes Generales*. In a related intervention, Ms Doina GHERMAN, Moldova *Parlamentul Republicii*, welcomed precisely the support provided by the EU to Moldova to assist the country in meeting the enlargement criteria. Mr RICKETTS also expressed that, despite not being an EU Member State any longer, the United Kingdom hoped to be able to cooperate with EU and candidate countries and to provide assistance to candidate countries to implement the reforms needed for EU accession.

A number of speakers noted that the accession process is a long one, but that the **lack of enlargement momentum in the Western Balkans was causing the EU appeal to be fading**, as expressed by Ms Elvira KOVÁCS, Serbian *Narodna skupština*. Mr Dženan ĐONLAGIĆ, Bosnia and Herzegovina *Parlamentarna skupština*, stressed the need for the European Council to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina in March 2024, in order to overcome the growing “euro-scepticism” in the country. Mr Ivan VUKOVIĆ, Montenegro *Skupština Crne Gore*, highlighted that the lack of progress in enlargement in the Western Balkans had opened the door for the growing influence of other external powers. Mr Alessandro GIGLIO VIGNA, Italian *Camera dei Deputati*, also noted that geopolitics did not allow for voids to exist, and that if the EU did not project its influence through enlargement in the Western Balkans, other powers would exert this influence.

The importance of **building political trust between the EU and candidate countries** was noted by Mr CONDE LÓPEZ and Ms Liisa-Ly PAKOSTA, Estonian *Riigikogu*. Ms

PAKOSTA underlined that the current historical moment for the EU made it necessary for current and future EU Member States to overcome bilateral disputes and to focus on mutual interests. Mr Murat Cahid CINGI, Türkiye *Büyük Millet Meclisi*, also regretted the “nationalisation” of the EU enlargement process by some Member States. Ms MENDES emphasised the importance of the Social Pillar in the construction of the European project and called for the EU to foster relations with candidate countries not only at the level of governmental institutions but more widely, engaging also civil society and social partners.

Another important aspect of the debate was the need for the **EU to carry out the necessary reforms to accommodate and function effectively with a larger number of Member States, and to play an active international role**. This subject was mentioned by various speakers, including Mr BUCHMANN, Mr HOFREITER, Mr RAPIN, Mr CHATZIVASILEIOU, Mr CONDE LÓPEZ, Mr GRAAS, Ms PELLEGRINO and Mr FERENČÁK. Mr CHATZIVASILEIOU and Ms PELLEGRINO both indicated that EU enlargement and reform should be parallel processes. Some speakers highlighted specific areas that would need to be reformed in view of a larger number of EU Member States in the future. This included the **financing and budgetary implications of enlargement in relation to the EU’s cohesion policy and Common Agricultural Policy**, as mentioned by Mr RAPIN, Mr CONDE LÓPEZ and Ms PELLEGRINO.

**Institutional reforms** were raised by Mr BUCHMANN, who also called for reviving the principle of subsidiarity and revising the proportionality principle. Ms PELLEGRINO called for simplified EU decision-making. Mr FERENČÁK expressed respect for the European Parliament proposals for the reform of the Treaties but noted that he did not agree with these, as they would lead to a debate that would undermine EU unity. He called rather to discuss reforms to the decision-making procedures within the current Treaty framework. Mr CHATZIVASILEIOU also noted that a **transition from unanimity to qualified majority voting in EU decision-making** should not be a precondition for enlargement, and that the use of qualified majority voting in the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy could undermine the EU’s unity and the role it could play in international relations. On the other side of the argument, Mr HOFREITER stressed that reforms were needed for the EU to respond to current challenges and specifically indicated the need to remove some of the unanimity requirements so that the EU’s role in the world would not be undermined by a single country using its veto, and blackmailing the EU. Ms SIMEONOVA called for unity among Member States in order to increase the strength of the EU. Ms MORKŪNAITĒ-MIKULĒNIENĒ also emphasised the need for the EU to act unanimously, but stated that it was unacceptable for a single country to use their veto and block common decisions.

### **Closing remarks**

In her final remarks, Ms KLYMPUSH-TSINTSADZE stressed that all candidate countries considered that the merit-based process of enlargement should continue but that, at the same time, the prospects for joining the EU should be credible and clear to candidate countries. She

noted her agreement with those speakers that had noted that the enlargement process should not become “bilateralised”, and urged all parts to prevent this. Enlargement was a common interest for all candidate countries and the EU itself, and this, she noted, required a longer term perspective on the process that would allow to overcome some of the short term obstacles. Lastly, Ms KLYMPUSH-TSINTSADZE noted that security was the basis for further economic development and social cohesion within the EU and was thus necessary to focus all efforts in achieving security for the EU as well as for a candidate country like Ukraine, as the basis for all other objectives.

In her final remarks, Ms COMAN noted the widespread support for Ukraine expressed by all speakers, as well as the importance given to the EU as a community of values both for EU Member States and for candidate countries. She echoed the need for reforms expressed during the debate, whether within the current Treaty framework or as part of a more ambitious reform project. She underlined the importance of the financing question, including the need for the EU to be able to raise its own resources. Ms COMAN welcomed the references made to the need for unity among Member States, but noted that this led to the important question of how can the EU speak with one voice in the face of important differences. She stated that it was time for courageous responses to address this question, notably the discussions around unanimity and qualified majority voting in decision-making processes. Lastly, she reiterated that the substance for EU reform existed already so it was time to seriously consider the questions of the method and the timeline for carrying these out.

## **CLOSING SESSION**

Mr VAN GOIDSENHOVEN thanked participants for their engagement in the debates, and briefly reviewed the topics which had been discussed during the Meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC. He reflected on proposals by Mr VERHOFSTADT about the EU's future preparedness and recognized the impact of EU enlargement on decision-making and the budget. He addressed Ukraine's integration and emphasised the need for resolving related challenges post-European elections. Mr VAN GOIDSENHOVEN thanked participants for their contributions and anticipated the March COSAC plenary meeting in Brussels.

Ms TILLIEUX then took to the floor, reiterating her pleasure at being able to host the meeting outside Brussels, in Namur. She thanked the participants, noting that their interventions would be a source of inspiration ahead of the LXXI COSAC in March. She underlined with satisfaction that an equal number of men and women had taken part in the panels of the Meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC, and promised to continue to pay attention to gender balance during the LXXI COSAC. She then briefly reviewed the topics which had been discussed during the second session. She noted that Ms CANTILLON had underlined the importance of the Social Pillar and that the Belgian Presidency would strive to continue the work in this field, including through a high-level conference on 15-16 April 2023. Ms TILLIEUX thanked all contributors to the success of the Belgian Presidency's first parliamentary meeting and looked forward to the March COSAC plenary meeting in Brussels.