

Reply of the European Commission
to the Contribution adopted by the plenary meeting of the Conference of
Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs (COSAC)

Tallinn, 26 to 28 November 2017

1. Future of the European Union

The Commission fully shares the assessment by the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs (COSAC) of the last 60 years' achievements and values of the European Union. This was also the starting point for the reflection process and debate on the Future of Europe launched by the Commission in 2017, in time for the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome.

The Commission contributed to this reflection through its White Paper on the Future of Europe and the various thematic reflection papers published between April and June 2017. In his State of the Union address of September 2017, President Juncker took the ideas from the Future of Europe debate forward and set out his personal vision as to how the European Union could evolve by 2025. The address set out a positive agenda, focusing on both completing current priorities but also embarking on more changes, ideally together at 27. On the same occasion, he presented a Roadmap for a More United, Stronger and More Democratic Union, which has largely been taken up by the European Council in its Leaders' Agenda of October 2017.

The Commission welcomes COSAC's support for the goals and commitments of the Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap, the Declaration of Rome and the Leaders' Agenda. The Commission's guiding principle when launching the reflection process has always been that the 27 Member States should move forward as a Union. On the basis of the White Paper and the reflection papers, the Commission has launched a broad debate across the continent, involving the European Parliament, national Parliaments, local and regional authorities, and civil society at large. The debate has taken place across Europe in many different locations, while citizens' dialogues are still ongoing.

The Commission fully agrees with COSAC that a well-functioning Single Market and the preservation of its four freedoms should remain at the very core of the European Union. The Commission is striving to deepen the Single Market further. The Commission has also proposed to work for a European Social Standards Union in which the Union has a common understanding of what is socially fair and in this respect welcomes COSAC's support for the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The Commission welcomes COSAC's efforts for enhanced convergence of all European regions and for cohesion at large. President Juncker made clear in his State of the Union address that the Commission very much shares this goal: Europe must be more united and Europe must be a Union of equality and a Union of equals. There must be equality

between its Members, big or small, East or West, North or South. This means that there can be no second class citizens, second class workers, or second class consumers.

The Commission strongly agrees with COSAC's emphasis on the importance of stability and prosperity in the EU's immediate neighbourhood to the East and South.

As regards the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, the Commission welcomes COSAC's support to the negotiation process and notes its request to be kept fully informed about the development of these negotiations. As the Union negotiator on the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union under Article 50 TEU, the Commission is fully committed to continue its contacts with and information of COSAC in that regard.

Speaking and listening to the national Parliaments and the European Parliament is essential to the Commission's inclusive and transparent approach to these negotiations. As representatives of Europe's citizens members of national Parliaments and of the European Parliament have an important role in conveying citizens' concerns and informing them about important developments. Any future relationship with the United Kingdom, where it is a mixed agreement, would also have to be ratified by all national Parliaments, as well as the European Parliament.

2. Bringing the European Union closer to its citizens

The Commission welcomes COSAC's emphasis on the need to involve national Parliaments in discussions and policy-making in relation to the future of the European Union. This is fully in line with the Commission's ambition to ensure that national Parliaments and civil society take an active part in shaping the future of the Union, including by intensifying Citizens' Dialogues across Europe. Since the start of the Juncker Commission, 478 Citizens' Dialogues have been organised in more than 160 locations across the European Union.

COSAC's call for an active democratic participation in reflections on Europe's future is also in line with the Commission's commitment to establish a close relationship with national Parliaments, stepping up interactions between Commissioners and national Parliaments. Since November 2014, Commissioners have engaged in more than 700 visits and meetings with national Parliaments. These visits and meetings give both parties the opportunity for a direct exchange and the Commission welcomes the close ties it has built in engaging more deeply and meaningfully with national Parliaments.

Since the Commission presented its White Paper in March 2017, these debates with national Parliaments have also included discussions of the various scenarios set out in the White Paper and the thematic reflection papers. The Commission strongly appreciates the high quality and valuable input it has received from national Parliaments, both in the direct debates with them and in the written opinions submitted by parliamentary chambers in the framework of the political dialogue. The Commission remains hopeful that national Parliaments will continue to share their views on this important topic.

The Commission believes, as set out in its Communication¹ in view of the Informal Leaders' meeting of 23 February 2018 on institutional issues that the European Union needs to bring about the change that citizens wish to see in Europe, looking at the added value of European policies and focusing more on the big things and less on the small things. This is the reason President Juncker on 14 November 2017 established a Task Force on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and Doing Less More Efficiently, which had its first meeting on 25 January 2018. The Commission appreciates COSAC's strong support to the establishment of the Task Force and is confident that the national Parliament representatives nominated by COSAC will provide a valuable input to the discussions and output of the Task Force.

The Commission appreciates COSAC's call on all EU institutions to ensure the full application of Regulation 1049/2001². Transparency is one of the top priorities of the Juncker Commission, as part of its 'Democratic Change' political priority. The Commission is continuously exploring ways to ensure a better application of the Regulation, for instance by reducing deadlines for replying and by ensuring a more proactive publication of information and documents, as in the area of trade and with regard to the negotiations with the United Kingdom. Its services meet regularly at technical level with those of the European Parliament and the Council in order to ensure, as far as possible, a coherent practice in the application of the Regulation.

3. Digital Single Market: development of e-services

The Commission welcomes COSAC's support of the Digital Single Market, as well as the goals and conclusions of the Tallinn Digital Summit and the October 2017 European Council Conclusions. The Commission agrees on the necessity of implementing the eGovernment Action Plan, with particular emphasis on the implementation of the once only principle and one-stop government measures.

For the European Union to strengthen its attractiveness in terms of investment and welfare, public administrations must lead through widely embracing the opportunities offered by digital technologies. Business must benefit from the removal of unnecessary administrative burdens. At the same time, governments need to live up to citizens' rising expectations by designing policies and providing services addressing their needs, while improving sustainability, social inclusion and accountability. The Commission has proposed a Single Digital Gateway, which will ensure that information necessary for

¹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council: A Europe that delivers: Institutional options for making the European Union's work more efficient - The European Commission's contribution to the Informal Leaders' meeting of 23 February 2018 - COM(2018) 95 final.

² Regulation (EC) No 1049/2001 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 May 2001 regarding public access to European Parliament, Council and Commission documents, OJ L 145 of 31.5.2001, p. 43.

businesses and citizens to be able to work, live, travel and do business cross-border is fully available on-line.

The Commission shares the importance given by the COSAC to electronic procurement and digitising communication between public administration institutions. Every year, over 250,000 public authorities across the Union spend around 14 % of GDP on goods, services and works. Public administrations also need to be interoperable - in other words be interconnected with each other to implement digital services that seamlessly traverse their departments. This can in turn allow citizens to easily identify and use these services, and businesses to report and interact with the public authorities in a simple way. The Commission has developed several tools to help digitise procurement at national level and in its Communication on public procurement of October 2017 the Commission reaffirmed the importance of digital public procurement.

The Commission agrees with the idea that digital skills are essential for successfully managing the digital transformation. 90 % of all existing jobs require at least a minimum level of digital skills. Workers need new skills to allow them to capitalise on the introduction of new technologies. The Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition, as part of the Skills Agenda, mobilises businesses, social partners and public authorities to improve digital skills and can help optimise the use of EU funds to raise skill levels and employability.

The Commission notes COSAC's suggestion to increase investment in the European digital sector and the digitisation of industry, as well as to create a European network of ecosystems. At EU level there is a clear case for investment in major and systemic projects that support the rise of digital ecosystems in cities, regions and Member States. Under the European Structural and Investment Funds up to EUR 21.4 billion has been allocated to finance the digital single market strategy for the period 2014-2020, of which more than EUR 6 billion for high speed broadband roll-out. As of April 2017, the European Fund for Strategic Investments related investments in the digital sector accounted for around EUR 17.8 billion.

In terms of building our connectivity capacities, the Commission fully agrees with COSAC's recommendation to increase the availability of high capacity networks, such as 5G, in Europe. The new Strategy on Connectivity for a Competitive Digital Single Market sets out a vision for a European Gigabit society. For example, all European households, rural or urban, should have access to connectivity offering a download speed of at least 100 Mbps by 2025. In most rural and remote areas, internet connectivity can play an essential role in preventing a digital divide, isolation and depopulation by reducing the costs of delivery of both goods and services. In 2016, 76% of European households could access high-speed broadband (at least 30 Mbps) and in some Member States a significant proportion of these households could already access networks capable of providing 100Mbps or more -however rural areas still lag behind.

4. Building an effective and sustainable Security Union

The Commission welcomes COSAC's support for EU legislative proposals to fight terrorism, with a special regard to the recently adopted counter-terrorism package.

The Commission agrees with the need to address the root causes of extremism by tackling the surge of hate speech as well as the dissemination of extremist or terrorist material online. This is why the Commission established the European Union Internet Forum in 2015 with a two-fold objective: (a) to reduce accessibility to terrorist content online, and (b) to empower civil society partners to increase the volume of effective alternative narratives online. The European Union Internet Referral Unit at Europol was also set up in 2015. To date, it referred over 40,000 pieces of content and in 80-90% of cases, the material has swiftly been removed by the host platform. Facebook, Google, Twitter and Microsoft have developed a tool called the Database of hashes, which should help ensure that known terrorist material removed from one platform cannot simply be re-uploaded onto another. The tool is now operational and in December 2017 Forum, the consortium reported running over 40,000 hashes of images and videos. The consortium of companies has grown from 4 to 12. The Commission also launched a Civil Society Empowerment Programme to support civil society organisations across the Union in developing effective, alternative narratives online, including a call for proposals to support such campaigns with a total budget of EUR 6 million. In September 2017, the Commission also presented guidelines and principles for online platforms to increase the proactive prevention, detection and removal of illegal content inciting hatred, violence and terrorism online. The Commission promised to come back to the issue by spring, assessing the progress made and whether additional measures, including possible legislative ones, would be needed.

On a broader policy level, the Commission established a High-level Commission Expert Group on Radicalisation in July 2017. In December 2017, the Group presented a first interim report, laying the basis of further action to match the scale and pace of the radicalisation phenomenon. The Radicalisation Awareness Network Centre of Excellence is and will remain instrumental for the implementation of the recommendations, but other actors, including Member States will need to come in as well.

The Commission equally welcomes COSAC's support to improve the exchange of information and intelligence, maximise the benefits of existing information systems, to address the gaps in the EU's architecture of data management and strengthen the interoperability of information systems. The Commission attaches great importance to these issues.

In December 2016, the Commission presented three legislative proposals laying down measures to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Schengen Information System. Negotiations with the European Parliament and the Council are currently ongoing.

In parallel, as planned since 2016, work continues to strengthen the Schengen Information System by introducing an Automated Fingerprint Identification System. This

will allow end users of Schengen Information System, such as police officers and border guards, to search in the system on the basis of fingerprint data, allowing for reliable identification of people, including those travelling under false identities. Nine Member States have volunteered to take part in the first phase of the roll-out of the Automated Fingerprint Identification System, expected to begin in March 2018.

Regarding the interoperability of information systems, the Commission would like to draw COSAC's attention to the legislative proposals adopted on 12 December 2017 to establish a framework for interoperability between EU information systems. The Commission calls on the co-legislators to work on the legislative proposals on interoperability as a matter of highest priority and also to reach rapid agreement on the remaining legislative proposals on the table that relate to individual information systems to improve information exchange so as to enhance external border control and internal security.

5. Preventing and combating irregular migration

The Commission welcomes COSAC's emphasis on fighting the root causes of migration and on cooperation with countries of origin and transit, including on readmission. It is of crucial importance to work in close partnership with the Libyan authorities, the African Union, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organisation for Migration. All Member States should contribute to close the funding gap of EUR 340 million for the North Africa Window of the EU Trust Fund. The first wave of projects under the European Sustainable Development Fund should be adopted by May.

The Commission welcomes COSAC's support to continued action on preventing criminal activity of smugglers and traffickers along the entire irregular migration route. While recalling that trafficking in human beings is not a migration related phenomenon per se, the Commission recognises that criminal networks are taking advantage of irregular migration routes to traffic victims. The European Union has developed a comprehensive legal and policy framework, equally focussed on protecting the victims, prosecuting the perpetrators and preventing the crime, anchored on the EU Anti-trafficking Directive. On 4 December 2017 the Commission adopted the Communication Reporting on the follow-up to the EU Strategy towards the Eradication of trafficking in human beings and identifying further concrete actions.

The Commission also thanks COSAC for highlighting the importance of finalising negotiations on the Common European Asylum System. Following up on the Joint Declaration on legislative priorities for 2018-2019, signed together with the European Parliament and the Council, the Commission calls on the co-legislators to work on the legislative proposals on asylum as a matter of the highest priority. In its recent Communication on the contribution to the EU Leader's thematic debate on way forward on the external and the internal dimension of migration policy, the Commission proposed a roadmap for adoption of all proposals concerning the Common European Asylum System.

In the Communication, the Commission has also highlighted other continuing actions necessary to developing a successful and sustainable European migration policy. The main priorities are in line with the ones identified by COSAC: protection of our external borders, returns and development of legal alternative pathways to Europe, including resettlement and first pilot projects for coordinating legal economic migration offers for key partner countries. Finally, the Commission encourages the co-legislators to finalise the negotiations on the Blue Card.
