

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

Sofia, 17 to 19 June 2018

1. European Union's parliaments and its citizens

National Parliaments have a crucial role to play in bringing the Union closer to its citizens, to make it more transparent and accessible. The European Commission believes in a stronger involvement of national Parliaments and civil society in shaping the future of Europe. The Commission appreciates the high quality of the input from national Parliaments in that regard, both in your written contributions and in the various debates between national Parliaments and Members of the Commission.

National Parliaments have a very important role in ensuring that the Union acts where it brings added value. We must join forces to show the value of what the Union does in order to build its legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens.

2. Subsidiarity and proportionality

The Commission welcomes the support by the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs (COSAC) for the work of the Task Force on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and “Doing Less More Efficiently” and looks forward to its continued active participation – and that of national Parliaments – in future debates on this important topic.

The final report of the Task Force was handed over to President Juncker on 10 July 2018 and was published, together with all contributions received, on the Commission website¹. The Commission is pleased that the first reactions from national Parliaments to the report have generally been positive.

The Commission has adopted on 23 October 2018 its Communication on “The principles of subsidiarity and proportionality: Strengthening their role in the EU’s policymaking”, in which it reiterates that the two principles are core elements of its better regulation agenda, which underpins how the Commission prepares its policy proposals. In the Communication, the Commission also sets in motion its follow-up to the recommendations of the Task Force and highlights where others need to act, to stimulate the debate at the subsidiarity conference in Bregenz on 15 and 16 November 2018.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/democratic-change/better-regulation/task-force-subsidiarity-proportionality-and-doing-less-more-efficiently_en

The Commission wishes to underline that it is for all relevant stakeholders at European, national, regional and local levels to consider and respond to the considerations and recommendations in the Task Force's report. We need to act together to better integrate the subsidiarity and proportionality principles at all stages of Union law-making. In particular, the Commission supports the statement made by some delegates at the COSAC Chairs meeting in Vienna in July 2018 that the European Parliament and the Council, but also national Parliaments, have an important role to play in this respect.

The Commission will examine, in close cooperation with the other Institutions of the European Union, if the 8-week delay for national Parliaments to issue reasoned opinions pursuant to Protocol 2 to the Treaties can be furthermore applied flexibly, in particular with regard to discounting the period over Christmas and the New Year, as requested repeatedly by national Parliaments.

Echoing the contribution of the COSAC, the Task Force made several proposals to change the Commission's better regulation guidelines, impact assessments, consultations and explanatory memoranda accompanying its proposals. The Commission is prepared to amend its better regulation guidance with a view to better capturing the views and experience of local and regional authorities, better assessing territorial impacts, and better informing about its assessments of subsidiarity and proportionality when presenting its proposals. It believes that the common assessment grid for subsidiarity and proportionality proposed by the Task Force is a useful instrument in this context that should be widely used. The Commission is currently taking stock of its better regulation policy and will report on the findings in the first half of 2019. The findings of the Task Force will be taken forward in the context of this stocktaking exercise.

Furthermore, the Commission intends to improve the quality and usefulness of its replies to national Parliaments' opinions by elaborating, in those cases where a Commission proposal raised concerns of a significant number of national Parliaments, aggregate responses to the issues raised which would also be transmitted to the European Parliament and the Council in a timely manner.

3. Integration and connectivity of the Western Balkans

The Commission welcomes COSAC's support for the Commission Communication of February 2018 for "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced European Union's engagement with the Western Balkans", as well as the reports on the Western Balkans partners and Turkey from April 2018 and of the conclusions and recommendations therein. The Commission agrees on the importance of supporting and guiding the partners from that region to pursue the necessary reforms.

The Commission shares COSAC's assessment that progress towards European Union accession should be based on the respect for the European Union's values. The enlargement process continues to be built on established criteria and fair and rigorous conditionality. Each candidate is assessed on the basis of its own merits. The assessment of progress achieved and the identification of shortcomings aim to provide incentives and guidance to the countries to pursue the necessary far-reaching reforms.

The Commission agrees that for the prospect of enlargement to become a reality, a firm commitment to the principle of “fundamentals” first remains essential. The partners concerned must deliver on the rule of law, the fight against corruption and organised crime, human rights, freedom of expression and independence of the media, strengthening the democratic institutions and public administration reform, economic development and competitiveness, as well as good neighbourly relations.

The Commission remains fully committed to continue supporting the candidates and potential candidates in their reform efforts. The implementation of these reforms will allow them to progress on their respective European paths.

The Commission shares COSAC’s assessment that the countries of the Western Balkans must also speed up their alignment with all foreign policy positions of the European Union, including restrictive measures. It maintains its position that the European Union’s enlargement policy must continue to export stability and that the Union cannot and will not import bilateral disputes. They must be solved as a matter of urgency by the responsible parties, by finding and implementing definitive and binding solutions.

The Commission continues to support a wide connectivity agenda to improve connectivity not only within the Western Balkans but also between the region and the Union. To do so, it will step up investments in infrastructure: transport and energy, but also environment and preparing for investments in the digital sphere. In line with the strategy and the outcomes of the European Union-Western Balkans Summit, the Commission will support the region’s own plan to create a Regional Economic Area, as well as implement the Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans, and promote exchanges and reconciliation through a Positive Agenda for Youth. The best results of this connectivity agenda will only be achieved if the countries engage in reforms compatible with the European Union in the sectors concerned.

The Commission welcomes COSAC’s support to strengthening EU-Western Balkans cooperation on counter-terrorism, prevention of violent extremism and the fight against organised crime. Combating radicalisation and terrorism are common challenges for the European Union and the Western Balkans, and the region is a priority partner in our cooperation in fighting terrorism. Building on priorities set in the February 2018 Western Balkans Strategy and endorsed at the Sofia Summit in May 2018, the European Commission and the European External Action Service are stepping up their engagement toward our partners at political level (through high level political dialogues) and through the Commission’s technical assistance. This commitment pays particular attention to closely involving all relevant European Union actors (agencies, Member States) as well as other international donors. The European Union will continue to cooperate intensively with Western Balkan partners, and will continue to help them to address needs in these important fields. The deployment to the Delegation of the European Union in Sarajevo of a counter-terrorism/security expert with a regional mandate further underlines the Union’s practical commitment to the region on these issues.

The Commission also agrees to better addressing cross-borders threats (including human trafficking and smuggling) along the internal-external nexus. The engagement of Justice

and Home Affairs Agencies will be crucial in this regard to deepen our existing cooperation, facilitating and increasing the exchange of information as well as promoting the conduct of Joint Actions and the setting-up of Joint investigation teams.

4. Cohesion policy post 2020

The Commission fully shares the assessment made by COSAC of the many years of achievements and added value for the European Union that the Cohesion Policy has contributed to.

This was also acknowledged as a good starting point for the reflection process and debate on the next Multiannual Financial Framework and the Cohesion Policy within it, which was launched by the Commission on 2 May 2018, in time before the European elections in May 2019.

The Commission welcomes COSAC's support for enhanced convergence of all European regions and for cohesion at large. There must be continuous convergence amongst all European regions, big or small, East or West, North or South. To facilitate this, the Commission has proposed adequate funding for all European regions for the next 7-year financial framework.

At the Plenary meeting in Sofia, COSAC recognised that Cohesion Policy is a key solidarity and investment tool for stimulating economic, social and territorial development in Europe. Some COSAC members also underlined that, via its instruments, accelerator and multiplier effects of the investments would be achieved and regional disparities would continue to be tackled, if Cohesion Policy as a whole gets to a timely start with the adoption of the future Regulation governing the funds as soon as possible.

In relation to COSAC's concerns over the complexity of existing administrative procedures governing cohesion policy funds, the Commission stresses that the cohesion proposals that it put forward on 29 May 2019 will make the policy more flexible to adapt to new priorities and will bring in significant simplification to the benefit of all involved stakeholders.

The Commission underlines the importance of advancing as efficiently as possible in the negotiations on the future of the Multiannual Financial Framework, taking into account the Member States' different national positions on the budgetary framework, as suggested by the COSAC.

Finally, the Commission welcomes COSAC's emphasis on the need to involve national Parliaments in the discussions and policy-making in relation to the future of the Multiannual Financial Framework. This is fully in line with the Commission's ambition to ensure that national Parliaments take an active role in the discussion on the future of the Union's budget, including by intensifying the dialogue with citizens of the European Union and raising awareness of what the European Union does through its Cohesion Policy funding.

5. European Pillar of Social Rights

The Commission welcomes COSAC's support for the European Pillar of Social Rights. This initiative is a unique chance to reconnect Europe with its citizens. The Pillar's rights and principles should effectively guide actions at European, national, regional and local level. It should be part of wider efforts to build a more inclusive and sustainable growth model by improving Europe's competitiveness and making it a better place to invest, create jobs and foster social cohesion.

The Commission has always stressed that the Pillar is essentially a joint endeavour. Responding to current and future challenges, it should serve as a guide towards efficient employment and social outcomes which are directly intended to fulfil people's essential needs, and to ensure better enactment and implementation of social rights. The implementation of the Pillar should entail full respect of subsidiarity and the division of competences within the Union, as well as of the role of social partners in delivering employment policies in Member States.

In order to be legally enforceable, the principles and rights contained in the Pillar require dedicated measures or legislation to be adopted at the appropriate level. Within the limits of its powers, the Commission tabled several concrete initiatives on certain parts of the Pillar, in particular on work life balance, on transparent and predictable working conditions in the European Union, on access to social protection for workers and the self-employed, and for the establishment of a European Labour Authority to ensure fair labour mobility.

At national level, the European Semester is the key instrument to steer the process of social convergence every year. The 2018 Semester was the first cycle to see the Pillar mainstreamed in the economic governance cycle of the European Union. The 2019 cycle builds on this experience. The Semester is an appropriate tool for monitoring progress in key areas covered by the Pillar. It acknowledges the diversity of challenges and the need to prioritise in the light of different starting points and available means across countries. The Semester is also the way to structure collective efforts over time: it builds on in-depth dialogue and reporting throughout the year, which is transparent and open to all actors. It is used in particular to structure peer reviews and benchmarking among Member States.

The Commission strongly advocates for the use of European Union's funds to support the implementation of the Pillar. The new European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) will provide more than 100 billion euro to lever and steer social investments in our Member States over the period 2021 to 2027. The ESF+ will be more closely aligned to the European Semester than its predecessor. In particular, it will help Member States to implement their country specific recommendations in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The European Pillar of Social Rights has been conceived not only to address the effects of the economic crisis but also to give answers to the rapid changes taking place in the European societies and the world of work: demographic ageing, impact of digitalisation

and globalisation. In this context, the Pillar is about delivering effective rights for citizens in the new social and economic realities. The essence of the Pillar is the following: investing in people is investing in their future, as well as in the economy. The social dimension is needed to create a resilient economy and sustainable growth, and to strengthen the European Union's competitiveness as an international player.

The Commission shares COSAC's assessment of the importance of access to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning. The first principle of the Pillar states that everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market. The Commission presented a Skills Agenda for Europe to make sure that people have the right skills for the labour market and society of the 21st century. Ten concrete actions should improve the quality and relevance of skills formation, make skills and qualifications more visible and comparable, and help individuals to make better career choices.

The Commission has made a legislative proposal on work-life balance to help both men and women to reconcile their working lives with family responsibilities. The proposed measures aim to increase women's participation in the labour market, thereby reducing the difference between men and women in employment. This initiative indirectly also contributes to closing the pay and pension gap, which undermines the value of women's contributions and increases their chances of poverty and social exclusion.

The Pillar acknowledges the importance of social dialogue. Social partners play an active and central role in shaping the Pillar, at European and national level. Their continued input has helped shape the Commission's proposal. They will be consulted on new initiatives where applicable, according to the existing rules of the European Union. Moreover, the Commission strengthened the role of the social partners in the European Semester. All across Europe, they are now involved in consultative meetings with national authorities and other relevant stakeholders to discuss how the key challenges identified in the country reports could translate into country-specific recommendations. The contribution of social dialogue when designing and implementing policy is important for improving co-ownership of reforms and ensuring that they are successful, sustainable and inclusive.
