

Plenary Meeting of the LVIII COSAC 26–28 November 2017, Tallinn

Background Information

Session I: The Future of the European Union

With the 60th anniversary of the foundation of European cooperation being celebrated this year, the future of the European Union has been widely debated. Although the EU has recently been navigating through different challenges such as Brexit, the migration crisis, various security issues and growing economic and social inequalities, the values that the EU was founded on, such as solidarity, liberal democracy, equality, the rule of law, respect for human rights, freedom, social justice, have remained as valid as they were 60 years ago. Furthermore, despite the difficult times, the EU has continued to thrive, and challenges have been taken as opportunities to make the necessary reforms and improve the work of the EU institutions.

Europeans favour a common path towards a better European future. Recently, the [Eurobarometer](#) showed that despite unsettled times, general **trust and optimism towards the EU is growing**. Trust in the EU has gained ten percentage points since autumn 2015, and more than half of the respondents (56% + 6% since autumn 2016) feel optimistic about the future of the EU. The [Parlemeter 2017](#) study found that 64% of the citizens believe that EU membership has benefited their country, which is four percentage points higher than in 2016.

The result of the referendum in the United Kingdom on its membership was one of the main reasons for the **informal summit in Bratislava** on 16 September 2016. This summit was the beginning of the process of making the EU with 27 Member States a success. The leaders agreed that the Union is not perfect but that it is the best mechanism to overcome the challenges that the EU is facing. The leaders adopted the [Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap](#), where they committed to a series of actions on migration, external borders, economy, defence, security, and social development.

The process launched in Bratislava culminated with the [Rome Declaration](#), marking the 60th anniversary of the Rome Treaty. The Declaration expanded the scope of actions and set additional priorities for the longer term. Leaders of EU27 and EU institutions confirmed their commitment to **make the EU stronger and more resilient** through even greater unity and solidarity within the EU and with respect for common rules. The leaders pledged to work towards a Europe where citizens feel safe and secure; where the economy grows and is sustainable; the focus is more on social aspects and equality; and which has a stronger role on the global stage.

At the 20 October 2017 European Council meeting, the President of the European Council Donald Tusk presented the [“Leaders’ Agenda”](#) until June 2019. According to the Agenda, the heads of state and government will meet more regularly to discuss and decide, to move forward with trickier policies like migration, deepening the Eurozone, security, finalising the Single Market, post-2020 MFF, common trade policy, etc. The discussions will be based on Decision Notes and will not involve any long drafting sessions on conclusions. The Agenda will be updated and amended in line with priorities and programmes. In general, the work will be guided by three principles – focusing on practical solutions, moving forward step by step, and preserving the unity of the EU. Moreover, [Tusk addressed a letter to the leaders](#), reminding them that unity cannot become an excuse for stagnation, but at the same time ambition cannot lead to divisions.

The European Commission has also offered a valuable framework to foster future debates and to test which vision could attract the most support. The [White Paper on the future of Europe](#) sketches out five scenarios for the EU by 2025 – carrying on; nothing but the single market; doing more with fewer Member States; doing less more efficiently; and doing much more together. The white paper was followed by a number of reflection papers on the [social dimension](#), [harnessing globalisation](#), [deepening the economic and monetary union](#), [the future of European defence](#), and the [future of EU finances](#). According to the findings published in the [28th Bi-annual Report of COSAC](#), the general feeling of national Parliaments is that a combination of the proposed scenarios would be the best solution.

In his annual speech on the [State of the European Union 2017](#), the President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker himself came out with a “scenario six” on the future of the EU. His speech stressed the three founding principles of the EU – freedom, equality, and the rule of law. Amongst a number of ideas, Juncker underlined the need for a European Pillar of Social Rights; a European Minister of Economy and Finance; a Euro-accession Instrument; a European Defence Union; a Subsidiarity and Proportionality Task Force. Furthermore, he proposed using more QVM voting, merging the positions of the Presidents of the European Commission and the European Council, and maintaining an enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans.

The United Kingdom notified the European Council of its intention to leave the European Union, triggering Article 50 on 29 March 2017. In a parallel process, the EU with 27 Member States is working on defining the future of the EU. **Brexit negotiations** rest upon a set of [European Council political guidelines](#), which define the framework for the negotiations and set out the overall positions and principles of the EU. In October, the leaders of the [EU 27 reviewed the state of Brexit negotiations and concluded](#) that there had not been enough progress in major aspects to enter the next stage of talks on a transition phase and on future bilateral trade relations.

All these reflections after Brexit show that the EU with 27 Member States and the EU institutions have decided to follow **the “bicycle theory”¹, i.e. you must keep moving, or you will crash**. A year and a half before the elections to the European Parliament is the right moment to rebuild the Union on stronger grounds.

Some points for discussion:

- 1) How does an EU of 27 make sure that the ambitions of the Member States will not lead to new divisions?
- 2) Do you agree, that the EU should undertake stronger cooperation in the field of security, migration, and defence, and for overcoming economic and social inequalities?
- 3) How could Brexit help us to redefine the future goals of the EU with 27 Member States?

¹ Theory popularised in the 1970s by Fred Bergsten.