Inter-Parliamentary Conference on the “Contribution of National Parliaments to Improving the Common Agricultural Policy” – a brief summary of the discussions

Croatian Parliament, Zagreb, 25 September 2023

The Conference was attended by 24 delegations from the parliaments of the European Union member states and of the Alps-Adriatic-Danube region countries, representatives of the academic and professional community, and agricultural institutions and chambers.

At the opening of the Conference, participants were addressed by:

**MARIJANA PETIR**, Chairwoman of the Agriculture Committee of the Croatian Parliament and initiator of the Conference, pointed out the need for greater involvement of both parliaments and farmers in the creation of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and in the preparation and design of measures. The CAP is not sufficiently adapted to the opportunities and needs of the member states, does not take account of the achieved results and places equal obligations on all states, especially with reference to the implementation of the European Green Deal, the use of pesticides, artificial fertilizers and antimicrobial agents. This approach, particularly in the countries where a large part of the territory is included in the ecological network, represents a limitation for the continuation, productivity and competitiveness of agricultural production. Consequently, from a demographic and developmental point of view, it represents a limitation for the preservation and development of rural areas.

AddressingtheConference in a video message, **JANUSZ WOJCIECHOWSKI**, European Commissioner for Agriculture, said that safeguarding food security is a key task of the current Commission. In this sense, farmers’ competitiveness should be enabled and their access to innovations assured. Also, the resilience of the food supply chain should be maintained and rural areas protected. Different perspectives for solving CAP challenges can be an obstacle to agreeing on a common solution, but also an opportunity to find new solutions. This is why a common focus and vision on the future of the CAP is needed.

**GORDAN JANDROKOVIĆ**, Speaker of the Croatian Parliament, emphasized that agriculture is one of the strategic pillars of the Union, and of the economies and societies of its member states. It is therefore important to take a sober and serious look at the context, both national and global, in the CAP and national agriculture management. This context is changing faster than we would like, along with the circumstances in which our farmers operate.

The Conference debates focused on three topics:

* Challenges and opportunities of the Common Agricultural Policy;
* Declaration on GMO-free Alps-Adriatic-Danube Region and review of the proposals for new regulations concerning plants obtained by new genomic techniques and the production and marketing of plant reproductive material; and
* National parliaments' initiatives.

At the first panel, **NORBERT LINS**, Chairman of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development of the European Parliament (EP), presented the EP’s achievements in the process of adopting the new CAP reform package, particularly with regard to ensuring a more equitable distribution of CAP funds and to supporting small-scale farmers, guardians of rural areas. He emphasized the pivotal role of national parliaments in implementing the CAP measures, particularly with reference to national strategic plans, which should serve as a guarantee that the needs of local communities are taken into account. This necessarily includes dialogue between the EP and national parliaments, as well as using the powers granted to national parliaments in line with the subsidiarity principle.

**WOLFGANG BURTSCHER**, Director-General at Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development of the European Commission, talked about the role of national parliaments in improving the CAP. He highlighted the following important topics: food security and affordability, inflation, readiness to adapt to crises, climate change, environmental degradation, introduction of new techniques and technologies in agricultural production, energy aspect of food production and fairer distribution of funds. Due to the different situations in individual member states, CAP implementation requires flexibility. The member states should define to what level they will use European funds, and what will be financed from national sources.

These are the highlights of the debate that followed:

Besides producing food, farmers safeguard biodiversity, the environment and the health of the soil. It is therefore necessary to value their contribution to the preservation of ecosystems (ecological contribution) in the future and to take actions aimed at changing the paradigm whereby agriculture is the biggest polluter.

It is necessary to strike the right balance between the ambitious goals set in the European Green Deal and the crises that have occurred in the meantime (health crisis, energy crisis, war in Ukraine). With a view to ensuring the competitiveness of agricultural production, new obligations imposed on farmers should be financed and certain derogations from the requirements of ecological programmes and agro-environmental climate measures should be considered. Moreover, the European Green Deal should be reassessed in a way that would take into account the challenges that have emerged after its adoption.

Special attention should be given to reducing the administrative burden placed on farmers and to reducing the unreasonable fines, especially in cases of force majeure over which farmers have no influence. An additional administrative burden is the planned introduction of the regional monitoring system as of January 2024, the implementation of which should be postponed to January 2025, to allow time to prepare accordingly.

Payments in agriculture should focus on short food supply chains for reasons of food security and environmental protection (as short food supply chains reduce the carbon footprint produced in food transport).

Third-country producers whose products are sold on the EU internal market should adhere to the same food production and animal welfare standards as EU farmers. In this sense, it is important to strengthen controls at European borders and sample the products originating from third-countries.

In order to achieve a high level of efficiency in developing sustainable practices, additional investments are needed in the development and application of alternative methods as well as an effective transfer of knowledge and resources to farmers in the field. For the purpose of digital and climate transition, it is necessary to facilitate access to knowledge.

The emergence of new diseases and pests and climate challenges necessitate the consideration and establishment of new strategies and measures to ensure the competitiveness of agricultural production. In this sense, farmers need to be informed in a timely manner about the obligations that they can expect in the future regarding climate and environmental requirements, all in order to ensure that their contributions to environmental protection and climate goals will be in line with legal requirements. Ensuring these early guarantees for farmers requires a timely definition of the objectives of the Common Agricultural Policy after 2027.

The CAP’s prospects after 2027 need to be urgently defined, ensuring that the Policy is simplified, the coordination between the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund and the European Rural Development Fund is enhanced and overlaps among CAP post 2027 plans eliminated. It is necessary to avoid the one-size-fits-all approach and focus instead on targeted strategies adapted to unique categories and characteristics of each member state that will take into account different production structures, different levels of productivity and different starting positions of individual member states.

The ability to quickly respond to crises, especially those related to plant and animal health and market crises should be an integral part of the CAP. In this sense, natural disasters and extreme climate conditions should be recognized as a threat to the survival of agricultural production.

It is necessary to financially strengthen the CAP and make it suitable for the future challenges in the agricultural sector. In the circumstances of rising prices of agricultural inputs, a strong CAP budget is needed that would ensure the sustainability of production, guarantee decent incomes for farmers and support the work of young farmers and women in rural areas, and provide a response to increased import rates of agri-food products.

In the global context, the EU needs to define the position it wants to take in terms of food production, taking into account the protection of natural resources and the environment, while respecting the differences between the north and the south of the EU.

The demographic crisis in rural areas entails labour shortage. The concentration of agricultural land in the hands of a small number of large-scale agricultural producers exerts additional pressure, significantly reducing the attractiveness of rural areas for living and working.

All the initiatives on the part of the Commission that will help reduce inflationary pressure on agricultural production are welcomed. The importance of mid-term reviews was highlighted in that sense.

It is necessary to ensure an adequate response to the underinvestment in some member states’ agricultural sectors, which is due to a shorter period of use of European funds, and which significantly affects these markets’ competitiveness.

The application of new techniques and technologies requires a stronger involvement on the part of the academic community in the processes of making, adopting and assessing the policies as well as in knowledge transfer and providing training to farmers.

It is necessary to establish standards related to the application of artificial intelligence in agriculture in order to clearly define the way of managing and using AI in the future.

The Commission proposed a revision of the MFF regarding the funds affected by the war in Ukraine, answered **BURTSCHER**. When it comes to income support, it is important to recognize the services farmers provide besides food production. This will be crucial in the future consideration of the CAP. In addition to the existing ones, it is possible to envisage other ways of administrative controls, it is up to the member states to propose them, knowing that the targeted granting of support enables better control of how they are spent. The EU’s goal is to guarantee food security, so in this sense, it is important that all the factors that contribute to food security are complementary, while respecting national food autonomy. The future of agriculture will be determined by the climate. Therefore, the society, farmers and the political system at all levels, will have to invest more in climate adaptation. He reminded of the possibility of envisaging risk management measures while creating national strategic plans, which no member state has yet used. To preserve agricultural production, it is necessary to rely on new production techniques and technologies, digitalization and precise management in agriculture, which requires time, investments and training to acquire the necessary skills. Education and training of farmers are recognized in national strategic plans as an important factor.

At the second panel, **PETIR** presented the Declaration of the Croatian Parliament on the GMO-free Alps-Adriatic-Danube Region and invited all the European countries to follow in the footsteps of Croatia and adopt the GMO-free approach. A discussion was held on the proposals for regulations on new genomic techniques (NGTs) and the production and trade of plant reproductive material.

In the discussion that followed, participants pointed out:

The impact of GMOs on human health, nature and the environment is unpredictable, which is why it is necessary to control their release into the environment.

Sustainability and environmental protection are key to agricultural production, biodiversity and long-term prosperity of food production, so in this sense the EU must provide an effective and scientifically proven approach that will guarantee food safety and quality and strengthen the competitiveness of agriculture.

An enhanced EU production of protein cultures that are used as feed would reduce the risk of introducing GMO products into the EU market.

It is necessary to provide consumers with access to information about the food they consume, which can be achieved by clearer declaration/labelling of GMO-free products.

The decision of the European Court of Justice from 2018 confirms that the products obtained by new genomic techniques are in point of fact GMOs and that they should be regulated as such, which cannot be read from the new proposal for a regulation on NGTs.

The proposed criteria to establish the equivalence of NGTs of Category 1 to conventional plants and their complete deregulation, allow for up to 20 different genetic modifications per plant. This means that we are denied the right to information about the food we eat and may entail new health and environmental risks. Without the obligation to label food and without control, it will not be possible to prevent genetic contamination of crops, especially since the proposed regulation for NGTs Category 2 abolishes the right of states to request restrictions for their territory.

It is necessary to regulate the patenting and traceability of genetic material because otherwise all entities in the food supply chain will be exposed to legal uncertainty. These solutions must be based on proven technologies, and should not lower the European environmental protection standards. In this sense, a clear assessment of these solutions’ impact on the environment is needed, which would confirm their ability to respond to the environmental challenges the EU is facing.

Doubt was expressed about the possibility for NGT plants and organic production to coexist together. NGTs are a challenge that needs to be discussed more broadly, focusing on the preservation of plant genetic resources, national plant varieties, biodiversity and on preventing untraceable biopiracy.

The proposals for new regulations on plants obtained through NGTs and on the production and trade of plant reproductive material are the exact opposite to the high climate and environmental requirements set by the EU, as most species, which are awaiting approval for use, are not resistant to environmental stress.

NGTs should not cause inequalities between farmers.

Significant support was given to the Declaration on the GMO-Free Alps-Adriatic-Danube Region. The importance of member states’ autonomous decisions in defining GMO-free areas and policies was pointed out, taking into account the specificities of individual member states.

The opposing views on NGTs should be viewed from the standpoint of ensuring food availability and sustainability of food systems, but also from the perspective of biodiversity, and the fact that the use of NGTs could feed 250 million people who currently do not have access to food, answered **BURTSCHER**. These are ethical issues. The Commission approached this problem from the perspective of human health, the impact on the sustainability of agricultural production, the impact on climate and the environment. The Commission needs to consider issues of NGT supervision and their impact on the environment, so in this sense it is necessary to provide guarantees that the use of NGTs will not endanger nature. Likewise, the Commission should consider the issue of monopolizing and patenting the production of NGTs. It is up to the citizens to decide which products they want to use, and the final decision will be made by the Council and the EP.

In the framework of the third panel on national parliaments’ initiatives, participants pointed out:

It is necessary to strengthen the political dialogue or find models for strengthening cooperation between national parliaments and the Commission. The Commission’s enhanced transparency could contribute to that effect, as could greater availability of information on issues that national parliaments communicate to the Commission.

Concern was expressed about limiting the use of pesticides. The imposed limitations did not take into account the specificities of individual member states and the current situation regarding the use of pesticides in each of the member states. Without alternative means of pest management, the limitation in question will incur considerable costs for farmers. It is therefore necessary to provide additional payments to farmers who limit the use of pesticides, and to provide the possibility of derogation for small farms.

The matter of Commission’s still awaited answers to the Croatian Parliament’s inquiry on regulating the shelf life of frozen products of animal origin on the EU market as well as to some other inquiries from national parliaments was also brought up.

The importance of the academic community’s engagement in the creation of the CAP was emphasized again, as well as the importance of assessing policy interventions and their impact on the set goals and expected results in the implementation of the policy, all in order to successfully analyse the CAP’s implementation and propose solutions for improvement. To that effect, an evidence-based approach is needed and scientifically recognized methods that can prevent many risks.

Besides food production, agriculture is important for the landscape, biological diversity and society as a whole, replied **BURTSCHER**, adding that all the services provided by agriculture should be valued. The role of national parliaments in the new CAP has been raised to a higher level and parliaments are given the possibility to participate in the creation of national strategic plans. The Commission encourages dialogue with national parliaments. Dialogue is needed, not polarisation, he added, as the Commission President Ursula von der Layen emphasized in her State of the Union speech.

The new CAP ensured a fairer distribution of support, and it is up to farmers to recognize their rights, but also their obligations, **LINS** said. We need a balance between flexibility for member states and compliance with minimum standards at the European level. In this sense, it is necessary to pay attention to our farmers’ competitiveness at the internal level, to respect the rules of the internal European market and to consider the interests of taxpayers.

Thanking everyone for their contribution during the Conference, **PETIR** reminded that land, air and water, to which agriculture and food production are closely linked, as well as the preservation of rural areas and biological diversity, permanently oblige decision-makers to adopt effective and sustainable policies and solutions. The representatives of the national parliaments can also contribute by getting involved and by actively articulating the positions that they represent. To that effect, they have to ask farmers and villagers what they need in order to continue producing food for us and preserving the rural area.