

CountrySide

European Landowners' Organization

N° 181

MAY-JUNE 2019 - BIMONTHLY - EN



Regional Forum for the Future of Agriculture: “Meeting the food and environmental challenge”

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Valeriu STERIU, Marta ZULUAGA ZILBERMANN, Francesco TRAMONTIN, Andrei SVORONOS, Mark TITTERINGTON

Regional Forum for the Future of Agriculture: “Meeting the food and environmental challenge”

Preceded by the annual Forum for the Future of Agriculture (FFA2019) held on the 9th April in Brussels under the auspices of the Romanian Presidency at the Council of the European Union, the regional FFA was held on the 14th May in Bucharest. Responding to the main topic of the FFA in April “the next generation”, the theme of the regional FFA was “meeting the food and environmental challenge”.

Louisa GEISMANN, ELO



The regional FFA was opened by Thierry de L'ESCAILLE, ELO, Gheorghe ALBU, LAPAR, and Borna DUVNJAK, SDF. Mr. de L'ESCAILLE mentioned that “in many European countries, the attractiveness of the agricultural sector is lacking, due to confusing legislation and the inability to innovate.” Referring to the European Union’s chief negotiator Michel BARNIER and speaker at the FFA on the 9th April, he highlighted that “we need a Sustainability Pact for farmers and more cash for the European Rural Development Fund.” After Brexit the European Budget will be lower and farmers will find it ever more difficult to reach proposed targets, especially those in combating climate change.

With a focus on the host country, Gheorghe ALBU, acting President of LAPAR, said that one of the greatest problems of farmers in Romania is the acute short-

age of labor and depopulation of villages: “Young people must be confident that they can build a future in agriculture as well.” Furthermore Mr. ALBU said that food and agriculture need to adapt to climate change and farmers must help to build a green Europe. The European Union is encouraging this through its environmental policies and its financial programs in agriculture. However, in the long run measures must be taken to encourage young people to remain in agriculture and the food industry in order to form a more viable and long-term solution.

The first panel was concerned with food and environmental security and climate change. Andrei SVORONOS, keynote speaker to this panel and EBRD representative, referred to recent statistics which showed that agricultural production must increase significantly by the year 2050 as the population will reach

9.5 billion people globally. The demand for food and the change in food regimes must be addressed. In recent years, specialists have noted an increase in animal protein production, which has led to an increase in livestock farming. At the same time agriculture accounts for 30% of energy consumption and carbon emissions. This causes new problems for farmers, when harvests are no longer predictable and significantly affected by high temperature variations, precipitation or other extreme weather conditions. Digital technologies are a solution to these problems, however “unfortunately Romania has a very large gap in research and development compared to other EU Member States. Measures must be taken to reduce this gap and recalibrate the agribusiness strategies”, said Mr. SVORONOS.

Confronted with the fact that agricultural production will need to double its out-

put by 2050, former State Secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture and Deputy at the Romanian Parliament Valeriu STERIU said: *"If we analyze agricultural statistics, I think we are able to achieve this goal. For example, in the 1950s seven million people were working the agricultural sector in Romania. Today this number is reduced to two million. However, production is much higher today than in the 1950s."* Mr. STERIU argued that the increase in agricultural production must also be counterbalanced by consumer education on the reduction of food waste – he sees the European Commission in this duty. Marta ZULUAGA ZILBERMANN from Cargill and Francesco TRAMONTIN from Mondelez highlighted in this panel that their multinational companies hope to enter into direct partnerships with farmers as actors in the supply chain and increase consumer confidence in the end products they offer.

During the second panel discussion on the challenges for the EU after the EP elections. Adrian RADULESU, President of the Romanian Farmers Association said that *"farmers are facing a double standard in terms of purchase prices. A machine bought on European funds is more expensive than one purchased on own funds. Romania does not have its own banking system and that's what hurts us the most. (...) Neither the next generation nor the gener-*

ations to come can fully repay their debt in the case of a bank credit in the agricultural sector." Currently farmers have to make use of European funds or draw up projects to be funded by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Michał KICINSKI, ECPA, added the issue of access to new technologies and PPP. MEP Maria Gabriela ZOANA Vice-president, Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development, concluded that debate by focusing on the need to obtain the same subsidies for all.

The last topic of the debate focused on the key priorities of the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Adrian RADULESU urged FFA2019 speaker and EU Agriculture & Rural Affairs Commissioner Phil HOGAN to invite farmer representatives to the next CAP consultations. Farmers are the guarantors for food safety and food security in Europe and therefore, *"the new European financial budget and agricultural programs must be developed in cooperation with farmers."* Dr. Michael Cristin ICHIM of INCDSB continued in this panel to put Romania in the context of gene editing and GMO crops. He addressed the paradoxical situation that while it is forbidden by law to grow GMO crops in the EU, it is legal to import gene manipulated soy beans from outside of the EU. Partici-

pants in the audience urged that the Romanian Council Presidency should act to resolve this problem. Camelia IONESU, from WWF Romania, shifted the focus of the debate from food to the environmental challenge – more specifically water and plastic waste. She highlighted the need to promote water ecosystems that allow the harvesting of fish locally in Romania rather than having to import it and at the same time will bring benefits to the quality of water in Romania. The conclusions were provided by Danut PALE, Vice-Chairman of the Committee on Agriculture, Forestry, Food and Industry at the Romanian Parliament.

All participating panelists agreed that Romania is currently one of the main agricultural powers in the European Union. Having currently reached only half of the agricultural production capacity, Romania has the potential to produce enough food to meet the needs of about 35 million people. Equipped with the right technological, educational and financial tools it has the possibility to do so sustainably.

The next FFA Regional will take place in Ireland on Thursday 26 September.

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Thierry de l'ESCAILLE, Maria Gabriela ZOANA, Adrian RADULESCU, Michał KICINSKI, Mark TITTERINGTON