WHERE ARE THE E-TOOLS TO MODERNISE THE CAP?

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EU farmers and the environmental community reacted strongly and criticised the executive for cutting the budget, giving member states too much leeway and fudging environmental and climate issues.

In recent years, the Commission has insisted that the EU agriculture sector should take the "digital leap" and enter the precision farming era in order to produce more with less and achieve a better environmental performance.

Critics suggest that the Commission’s proposals do not reflect the ambition that has been cultivated so far about precision or smart farming and call on EU policymakers to take concrete steps.

In light of the rising global competition, analysts stress the need for a quicker adoption of new technologies in the sector, warning that otherwise the EU will be left behind.
Hogan: EU member states will decide on agriculture innovation after 2020, not Brussels

‘Smart villages’ are modernisation tools to be taken seriously

Bayer boss: Digital farming-sustainable production link ‘not yet clear’ to policymakers

Agriculture digitisation not only for controls, stakeholders ‘remind’ the EU Commission

Agriculture expert: Like organic, transition to digital farming needs support
Hogan: EU member states will decide on agriculture innovation after 2020, not Brussels

By Bogdan Neagu | EURACTIV.ro

Member states and not the European Commission will direct the precise support and funding for innovation and digitisation of farming in the post-2020 Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), EU Agriculture Commissioner Phil Hogan told EURACTIV Romania in an interview.

“The budget for precision agriculture depends on the needs and the precise budget allocations within the overall CAP envelope that member states will receive,” Hogan emphasised.

“The experience of the current CAP applied across 28 member states of varying climates, methods of production and traditions, shows that Brussels can no longer determine what has to be done in each and every member state,” the Commissioner explained.

Phil Hogan spoke with EURACTIV Romania’s Bogdan Neagu.

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There is a strong feeling among European farmers that the EU is lagging behind in terms of agriculture innovations. What does the Commission have in plan to address this issue?

The EU is a world leader in agricultural innovation and nowhere in the world will you find more productive and knowledge-intensive farming. Just compare yields per hectare or per animal. The challenge is translating that innovation onto the farm and we are addressing that challenge through the European Innovation Partnership, which is a key part of the CAP.

The Commission’s proposal for the new CAP puts innovation and, specifically, digitisation at the centre. Each member state will have to explain what they intend to do to stimulate the use of farm advice, improve the uptake of innovation and digitisation (think of precision farming and satellite use). To emphasise the Commission’s commitment, we have increased the budget for agricultural research of €10 billion, much of which will be invested in the area of digital farming.

Since EU plans to harren its regulations on pesticides and the recent ECJ ruling on the gene editing seems to have made the plant breeding rules tougher, how European farmers can compete with the American ones, for example. How can EU funding help improve productivity and innovation in the agricultural sector?

The significant increase in the value of EU food exports indicates that EU farmers are competitive, but they are operating in a very competitive environment. Every effort must be made to ensure that they remain competitive, not alone in comparison to US farmers. That is precisely why we are making such a huge investment in innovation and research and making such an effort to ensure that the benefits of such innovation and research are translated from the laboratory to the farm.

Digitisation will change farming in many ways; better use of inputs such as fertiliser, autonomous machinery (robots and driverless tractors), changes in the supply chain (direct marketing might get a new life), etc.

In the new CAP, member states will design the appropriate support programmes to support the new possibilities such as digitisation. It will be Romania and not Brussels who will decide how to proceed.

The proposed budget for the future CAP is lower than in the current MFF. How about the funds allocated for new technologies? Is farming innovation going to receive more support in the future MFF?

The new MFF reflects a very challenging context – Brexit as well as new priorities and challenges demanded by the member states. Under the circumstances, I regard the outcome for the CAP as a fair one and one which reflects a strong statement of support for the farming sector in Romania and across the EU.

My priority was to safeguard as much as possible the direct payments which are a necessary support to farmers’ income. Reflecting that the objectives of the CAP post-2020 are simplification and modernisation, innovation will be given a prominent place. Investments in knowledge and innovation ensure long-term productivity.

Therefore, it makes perfect sense to focus the support on innovation. However, under the CAP, it is the member states who will direct the precise support and thus the funding for innovation as well. The Commission has proposed a substantially increased budget of €10 billion for agricultural research. The objective of this research is, of course, to result in practical knowledge to be used on the ground by farmers.

Smart farming seems to be the Commission’s envisioned future for European agriculture, but the farmer community cites a lack of ambition in the proposal for the future CAP budget. Can the EU increase the funding for precision agriculture and how can the farmers access those funds?

The experience of the current CAP, applied across 28 MS of varying climates, methods of production and traditions, shows that Brussels can no longer determine what has to be done in each and every Member State.

In the new proposal, we define a number of specific areas where action needs to be taken but leave it to the member states to define what is needed in their specific situation. Think of climate change, young farmers, but also knowledge and innovation.

To give an example, the use of robots that milk is more or less common in some member states but relatively rare in others. In those areas where the use is rare, it may be useful to organise training or to exchange information on the use of such robots and it may even be useful to support investments in this technology.

Therefore, the budget for precision agriculture depends on the needs and the precise budget allocations within the overall CAP envelope that member states will receive.
The expansion of e-tools in rural areas will enable villages to become more agile, make better use of their resources as well as improve their attractiveness and the quality of life of rural residents, argue MEPs Franc Bogovič and Tibor Szanyi.

Franc Bogovič sits in the EPP group and is a member of the Committee on Regional Development. Tibor Szanyi is in the S&D group and is a member of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development.

Agriculture may not be as important as it was in the past, for example in the number of jobs, but it still has an enormous impact on rural areas. It is an essential factor for preserving rural landscapes and has an ecological and social function within our food production chain.

Agriculture provides benefits for other sectors, such as the tourism or the energy sector and we have experienced that many SMEs have developed successful business models connected to agricultural production.

We strongly welcome and commend the EU objectives in the new CAP proposals, related to innovation, digitalisation of agriculture as well as measures for young farmers, who will lead the transformation and modernisation of European agriculture.

Result-oriented indicators, which will follow these objectives need to be realistic. National administrations will now saddle the large burden of establishing measures and strategic plans, in order to follow the indicators and objectives.

This requires proactive administrations (to say the least) and we would like to create a framework in the EU, in full respect of the subsidiarity principle, that gives local administrations the freedoms necessary and that rewards proactivity with financial opportunities for the region.

With the help of digital platforms, the farmers’ position in the value chain has been dramatically strengthened. Shorter value chains allow the farmer to sell his or her produce directly to the consumer, thereby increasing the choice for the consumer, while circumventing often monopolistically acting retailers.

The farmer gains autonomy and the ability to negotiate a fairer price...
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for his products. With this is in mind, the importance of the EU objective to strengthen all e-tools in agriculture becomes crystal clear.

10 billion euros from Horizon Europe, reserved for innovation in agriculture can be one of the main tools for financing research projects, connected to the smart village philosophy;

But the strategic advantage of the smart village objectives is that our vision is dispersed throughout several legislative proposals and EU funds.

Our main goal needs to be to establish the connection between these funds. A good example for this is the EU funded LEADER programme, which is designed to support rural businesses and to create jobs and support the rural economy, in the SME sector.

The cooperation between research and private sector will be crucial for the smart villages to succeed. Our hope is that a small number of best-case scenarios will serve as examples and final convincing factor, to persuade investors to match the EU funds ready to be dispersed for smart villages and thereby the revitalisation of rural areas throughout our beautiful continent.

The very practical way forward is to improve the legislative proposals and to encourage national administrations to see smart villages as a serious modernisation tool, which can become the key factor for repopulating rural areas in the EU, by improving life quality in these areas. We need to encourage all stakeholders (research, SMEs, IT sector, energy sector, farmers, advisory services and so on) to be proactive and cooperative.

Smart village is a new concept in the realm of EU policies, yet it has become an important one among policymakers as well as other stakeholders. There is no definition at the European level on what this term actually means.

We therefore implemented a pilot project in the Agricultural Committee of the European Parliament, with the aim to find and establish a definition for “Smart Villages”, which integrates the range of different interpretations and conceptions currently existing.

It is already clear that ‘smart’ means the ability and the possibility to use all the modern tools, services and beyond. It is crucial to gain inputs from stakeholders and academics who are involved in relevant projects or programmes.

Ecorys, one of oldest economic research and consulting companies in Europe, has been granted the budget by the European Commission for the pilot project to develop the scientific definition and tools on how smart villages need to be implemented, in order to be able to properly harness the success and high hopes we have placed into our vision.

We share the understanding that digital technologies include information and communication technologies, the exploitation of big data or innovations related to the use of the Internet of Things, for example.

The systematic connection of these tools will act as a lever that enables smart villages to become more agile, make better use of their resources and improve the attractiveness of rural areas and the quality of life of rural residents. Ecorys has already identified some successful initiatives that are going in the rights direction, such as ‘Bras-sur-Meuse’.

They are using European funding to create telework centres offering high-speed broadband, training for elderly, a co-working space, and many activities for the local inhabitant to stimulate entrepreneurship and to fight against unemployment and social exclusion in rural territory.

Or the ‘Eskola village’, which uses community building to organise citizen-led development providing place-specific services including the use of IoT. They foster the integrated development of the village. These examples are serving as baselines for the more complex vision of smart villages; a rural area, which profits from the synergies created by linking existing technology with each other in a systematic way.

We need to understand smart villages as communities in rural areas that develop smart solutions, in order to deal with challenges in their local context. They build on existing local strengths and opportunities to engage in a process of sustainable development of their territories.

They rely on a participatory approach to develop and implement their strategies to improve their economic, social and environmental conditions, in particular by promoting innovation and mobilising solutions offered by digital technologies. Smart villages benefit from cooperation and alliances with other communities and actors in rural and urban areas.

The initiation and the implementation of smart village strategies may build on existing initiatives and can be funded by a variety of public and private sources. Of course, we should not forget (digital and precision) farming, food production and environment, which give the core difference between urban and rural settlements.

All of this will always boil down to our key message: smart villages are the opportunity to use digitisation, not only for farming but also for rural communities and the current reform of the CAP presents an opportunity to realise this.
The connection between digital farming and sustainable production is not yet clear in the minds of many policymakers, Bayer’s Bruno Tremblay told EURACTIV.com in an interview, adding that some farmers look at this kind of innovation as a way to control them.

Bruno Tremblay is the head of EMEA at Bayer. He spoke to EURACTIV’s Gerardo Fortuna on the sidelines of the “Future of Farming Dialogue” event on 17-19 September in Monheim, Germany.

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

- Digital farming and gene-editing will be the key drivers for future farming
- The key question is whether we want Europe as an exporting or a self-sufficient region
- EFSA needs to communicate better the nature of their work.

How do you see the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) proposals?
Critics suggest that the much-awaited introduction of new technologies and precision farming practices in the sector is not sufficiently supported.

Originally the CAP’s aim was to ensure a sufficient agricultural production of food in Europe, following all the tensions we had after World War II. After reaching self-sufficiency in the 1970s, the purpose of the CAP became allocating subsidies to ensure that we were still producing agricultural goods across Europe, managing more or less which sort of crops to grow and the quantity to produce.

My feeling is that the CAP will now be more focused on how goods are produced. There are no more...
Incentives based on the size but rather on the “green” component of production. The CAP is becoming greener and greener, focusing on how to produce food more sustainably, something that can be achieved with innovations like digital farming.

But I think the connection between digital farming and sustainable production is not yet clear in the minds of many policymakers. Digitalization does not mean confiscating data from the growers; it’s more about the positive impact that precision farming will have on sustainable and productive farming in Europe.

Indeed, some growers look at this kind of innovation as a way to control them...

Data always belongs to the growers, even after they choose to share it on our platform. We cannot use it for any purpose, either internally or externally, without their prior consent. The data may then be used for giving growers a better understanding of all the decisions they must make on their fields.

We see these digital platforms more as a solution provider. The idea is to generate value for our customers and our company by providing digital technologies to growers.

There is an ongoing discussion in Europe about the future of farming in light of increasing global competitiveness. What do you expect from the next European Commission?

The key issue that will be interesting to look at is the vision for European agriculture in the future. Particularly we need to understand whether we still aim to be an exporting region in the world, or whether we are going more in the direction of having a self-sustainable production, focusing more on organic farming and being self-sufficient.

In Europe, there is a tendency to think more about how we produce and not so much about agricultural competitiveness. I believe that farming in Europe would benefit from a broader access to innovation and new technologies. Companies should participate more in dialogue with different stakeholders, while today there is a belief that innovation in agriculture is not what consumers want. We should interact more to understand consumer expectations and communicate more transparently on our innovations.

Again, the question is about our vision: is it just to feed ourselves or to be an exporting region towards the other Mediterranean and African countries? From a political point of view, Europe is trying to help Africa because of the migration challenge, and I guess agriculture is a part of the answer.

Does Bayer have a strategy for Africa?

We are investing to help African countries in reaching self-sufficiency. But it will take some years and at the same time, there is a significant growth of the population. Hunger and starvation in Africa will trigger more and more immigrants towards Europe. I believe agriculture should drive growth and prosperity and should not be used not only to feed the European population. It should also play a political role towards Africa and Mediterranean third countries.

A recent EU Court decision on gene editing has “shaken” the agri-food industry and Liam Condon told me that it “will slow down innovation”. Do you share this view?

Yes, we were disappointed with the Court’s decision to classify gene editing with the same regulation as GMOs. It is a missed opportunity for agricultural innovation in Europe. Digital farming, gene editing and other plant breeding methods are the key drivers for the future of farming in Europe and thanks to both we can have much more sustainable farming.

Gene editing is a much less invasive technology of breeding and much more accurate. Furthermore, these methods can significantly cut the development time of new plant varieties to less than half of the current duration of as much as 15 years. On top of that, if you manage to properly develop hybrids with higher resistance to certain diseases or insects, then you could probably use fewer chemicals, and we have studies proving that this technology significantly reduces the use of chemicals.

I’m concerned for Europe if it decides to reject this technology, while in North and South America, or even in Asia, they’ll move very quickly into these new breeding techniques since they see benefits that go beyond even GMO technology. Europe’s breeders and farmers will lose out, without a chance to explore the huge potential and benefits of these plant breeding innovations in practice.

The glyphosate debate has divided EU stakeholders and sparked discussions about the credibility of the EU decision-making process and whether it is based on scientific evidence or emotionalised. What is your position?

The fact is that all these emotions were created when we had the renewal of glyphosate registration at European level back in November 2017. But there is no question or no debate by any national agencies or regulatory authority around the world where products based on Glyphosate are registered. Glyphosate has been a valuable and safe tool for farmers and other users for over 40 years. Glyphosate is probably the active ingredient with the highest number of

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scientific studies in the industry.

It’s more a political debate and to address it, we must demonstrate more dialogue and cooperation with local governments because they need to feel the proximity of our team. We are working on the safety data we could share with the public as a part of the trust that we need to regain since the debate is very emotional and passionate, but science has not had many roles in this discussion. In some countries this debate goes beyond glyphosate: it’s a general concern about pesticides and how pesticides have been registered.

Recently, there was a discussion on how EFSA is working on the registration process and I think that national government and EU agencies must be more pro-active in communicating what is their work and how they work.

We are only one of many glyphosate players in Europe. For us is an important product and it’s critical for growers to produce safe and affordable food because it is part of their normal agronomical practice. Therefore, we don’t see how growers could replace glyphosate with a safer and more cost-efficient product in the future.

So not even a wave of rulings like the ones that happened in the US could affect Bayer operations in Europe?

We disagree with the verdict and intend to seek trial court review and appeal, if necessary. What happened in the U.S. was a specific jury decision in California relating to a labelling discussion about whether there was enough warning information on the label. More than 800 scientific studies – including an independent study which followed more than 50,000 licensed pesticide applicators and farm workers and their spouses for more than 20 years – and regulatory authorities all over the world confirm that glyphosate and glyphosate-based herbicides are safe for use when used according to label instructions.
Agriculture digitisation not only for controls, stakeholders ‘remind’ the EU Commission

By Sarantis Michalopoulos | EURACTIV.com

The much-awaited digitisation of the EU farming sector has taken centre stage in the last few years. But its ultimate application in the post-2020 Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is still unclear.

Digitisation is seen as a way to help EU agriculture secure its position in an increasingly competitive global environment and simultaneously make the sector greener by reducing the number of inputs.

The agri-food industry is pushing for a quick adoption of new technologies. It has called on policymakers to incentivise the digital trend and create a sustainable framework in order for farmers to take the digital leap”.

European Commission officials have also admitted that the EU should not miss the train of innovation and digitisation.

The EU executive wants the sector to move toward the so-called precision farming practices, meaning producing more with less input. With the smart of precision farming, a farmer will be able, through the use of new technologies (drones, sensors), to take care of the slightest detail of his farm from watering to pesticides’ spraying.

This practically means that the environmental impact is reduced as the right amount of inputs is used. In addition, this will result in reduced overhead costs, considering that less input, such as pesticides, will be used.

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**MEMBER STATES AND INNOVATION**

In its new CAP proposals, the Commission has left much space to member states to design their national CAP strategies in accordance with their unique needs. This tailor-made approach has fuelled the discussion about a “re-nationalisation” attempt, something that the executive officially denies.

In an interview with EURACTIV Romania, EU Agriculture Commissioner Phil Hogan said that in the next CAP, the member states and not the European Commission will direct the precise support and funding for innovation and digitisation of farming.

“The budget for precision agriculture depends on the needs and the precise budget allocations within the overall CAP envelope that member states will receive,” Hogan emphasised.

“The experience of the current CAP applied across 28 member states of varying climates, methods of production and traditions, shows that Brussels can no longer determine what has to be done in each and every member state,” the Commissioner added.

In its proposals, the Commission emphasised the role of technologies in simplifying the farm controls or checking for instance that crops are being rotated – one of the requirements of the CAP in order to preserve biodiversity and soil health.

Critics suggest that without a concrete EU-wide approach, member states won’t turn to innovation-driven solutions.

In addition, the executive is criticised for disproportionately focusing on the controls and not on the digitisation of the sector on the ground.

“In the current CAP proposals and discussions we observe more of a policy using digitisation and IT to facilitate observance and compliance than a policy to stimulate adoption and application of these revolutionary techniques in agriculture,” told EURACTIV.com Yara, a multinational fertiliser and crop nutrition company.

“The support to farmers, large and small, to accelerate adoption and lower thresholds through the CAP funding should come more to the forefront,” the company added.

Yara insisted that precision farming is a “win-win” game from both an economic and ecological perspective.

“In the EU, there is still a huge untapped potential of benefits related to the wider use of precision farming tools. Precision farming fully belongs to the CAP, which is evolving towards more greening measures.”

Yara believes the precision farming benefits farmers and consumers but should be better explained and understood, a view that is shared by Bayer’s Bruno Tremblay.

“Policymakers don’t fully understand the connection between digital farming and sustainable production,” he recently told EURACTIV.

**SPECIFIC MEASURES**

Yara suggests a number of measures that could help adopt precision farming practices more rapidly.

One of them is support for nutrient management plans, which are part of the best farming practices together with a wide array of precision farming tools, as part of the eco-scheme.

Yara also backs subsidies to support adoption as “every step in the journey should be supported”.

“Reward should not be for reaching a final target (such as specific N-Balance requirement, minimum N-leaching rate or higher productivity by given %) but for progressive improvements,” the company noted, adding that granting flexibility could also play a role.

“It is also possible to incentivise the adoption of smart agriculture, by granting farmers who adopt precision farming solutions the flexibility to adapt their practices to the requirements of their agronomical and environmental conditions.”

**FARMERS’ ACCESS TO DATA**

Speaking at the “Digital and Precision Farming: Challenges and Opportunities for Farmers and Smart Villages” on 24 September in the European Parliament, Daniel Azevedo from EU farmers’ association Copa-Cogeca noted that the Commission’s proposals could be more ambitious.

“We do recognise that the Commission DG Agri, working with the DG Connect, also all the services of the DG Research, have done a lot of programs on precision farming,” he said, adding though that there are some issues regarding the regulatory that sometimes “hinders innovation”.

However, he noted that the Galileo and Copernicus satellites systems should not only be used by control agencies but the farmers themselves.

He explained that EU farmers should have access via a database to all data generated by these satellite systems, initially designed for control-related reasons, in order to be able to use these for other purposes like precision farming.

“And we have a great example in Estonia, where all the maps are available for the farmers. The farmer has a username, he enters and has access.”

*Gerardo Fortuna contributed to this article*
Agriculture expert: Like organic, transition to digital farming needs support

By Sarantis Michalopoulos | EURACTIV.com

Changing farming practices is always risky and if we want EU farmers to enter the digital era, we need to support them financially for a certain transition period, as has been the case with switching to organic farming, agriculture expert Luc Vernet told EURACTIV.

“When a farmer changes his practices there is always a risk. For instance, when they go organic, there is a risk to face, because they change the production model and may be confronted with 2-3 difficult years of important losses,” Vernet said.

“If we want farmers to go digital, we need to secure them for a certain transition period of time and I think eco-scheme could do that,” he added.

Vernet, a senior advisor at Farm Europe think tank, which specialises in EU agricultural affairs, commented on the European Commission’s proposals for the post-2020 Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), stressing that they lack a vision for digitisation.

“We need a common vision and strong leadership in order to create a dynamic in the sector. If we don’t do anything, we will only have an elite of big farmers in a position to invest in the new digital tools,” he warned.

“What is the new model? The Commission basically says ‘we don’t know what the future is’ and asks the member states to come up with a vision and find the proper policy by themselves,” the French expert emphasised.

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For Vernet, digital farming should take centre stage for two reasons: first because the profitability of Europe’s farming sector is low and secondly because the use of inputs should be reduced.

“We currently have this debate on chemicals and precision agronomy. How can we make sure that in the future agriculture does not disturb the ecosystem but plays with it in order to be productive and efficient by using fewer resources?” he wondered.

“With precision agriculture, farmers will be able to water only when it’s necessary and use the right quantity in order to optimise the production. In terms of pest and disease control, we know that either chemical or organic are toxic.”

“If we don’t use them, we will go back to the old days, where we had food security issues. We need to control the diseases in a wise way. Clearly, digital farming is the way.”

The agri-food industry has criticised the Commission’s proposals on the sector’s digitisation, saying that they disproportionately focus on controls and not on a transition toward precision farming practices. By using satellite systems like Copernicus, the EU executive aims to simplify and optimise controls.

THE ECO-SCHEME

Vernet explained that the eco-scheme provision in the Commission’s proposals is an “empty box” as only some part of the budget will be dedicated to green measures, on a voluntary basis.

“Why don’t we design the eco-scheme at the EU level in a way that supports certain transitions? A transition which will have a double objective: the economic and environmental. If we want to have sustainable agriculture in 5-10 years’ time, it has to be profitable as well,” he added.

“We could focus the eco-scheme on digital, precision farming, conservation farming all the models that are emerging and we see that are profitable for the farmers and the society,” he stated.

In addition to the eco-scheme, Vernet also suggests enhancing the investment measures in the second Rural Development pillar.

In an interview with EURACTIV Romania, EU Agriculture Commissioner Phil Hogan stressed that with the new delivery model, it’s up to the member states to decide how they will use their funds to digitise the sector.

But for Vernet, this will lead EU member states to a deadlock, as the EU executive proposes a massive cut in the second pillar and the income support, and in the meantime it tells the member states: do better with less.

“If such a proposal goes through, member states will have to keep the income support and simultaneously invest with 23% less money in the second pillar. If we don’t have a strong EU-wide orientation, the member states won’t have the capacity to drive the sector in a certain direction. The proposal gives no room to member states to drive a change in agricultural policy.”

The expert praised the Commission, however, for its “string push” to increase the capacity of advisory services.

“Owning a GPS does not make you a digital farmer. We need to work on an eco-system around digitisation where you have the farmers making the decisions, with the right tools, but also the cooperatives and advisors that can transform big data into meaningful precision agronomy.”

He said that today, this eco-system is fragmented, as the main actors of digital farming are dealing with pieces of the farmers’ puzzle: precision nutrient, precision seeding or precision irrigation, among others.
Contact us

Irene Marchi
Project Manager
irene.marchi@euractiv.com
tel. +32 (0)2 226 58 23

Sarantis Michalopoulos
Reporter
sarantis@euractiv.com
tel. +32 (0)2 226 58 28

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