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General Affairs

Brussels, 7 March 2017

President **Louis Grech**
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for European Affairs
of Malta

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- Where declarations, conclusions or resolutions have been formally adopted by the Council, this is indicated in the heading for the item concerned and the text is placed between quotation marks.
 - Documents for which references are given in the text are available on the Council's internet site (<http://www.consilium.europa.eu>).
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ITEMS DEBATED

Preparation for the March European Council

The Council examined draft conclusions for the European Council meeting to be held on 9-10 March, prepared by the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, in cooperation with the Maltese presidency and the Commission.

The European Council will focus on:

- jobs, growth and competitiveness: the European Council will discuss how to ensure the sustainability of the economic growth in the 28 member states; it will examine the implementation of structural reforms by member states and call for a rapid extension of the European fund for strategic investments; the European Council will assess the state of play of the EU trade policy and review progress on legislative priorities and major strategies, including those to deepen the single market
- external security and defence: the European Council will assess the implementation of its December 2016 conclusions and reflect how to strengthen Europe's security and defence to better protect its citizens in a challenging geopolitical environment
- migration: the European Council will take stock of the implementation of the measures agreed by EU leaders in Malta on 3 February 2017 to further curb the migratory flow on the Central Mediterranean route
- external relations: the European Council will discuss the situation in the Western Balkans and may address other items in the light of events

An [annotated draft agenda](#) was discussed by the Council on 7 February 2017.

European Semester

The Council examined a [presidency synthesis report](#) on the contributions of five Council configurations involved in the current European Semester exercise.¹

The report notes that, according to the Commission's latest winter forecast, the economies of all 28 member states are currently growing. It emphasises that decisive and coordinated policy action as well as swift reform implementation remain essential to strengthening the ongoing recovery.

The European Semester involves simultaneous monitoring of the member states' fiscal, economic and employment policies over a six-month period every year. In the light of the guidance provided by the European Council, the member states will prepare their national reform programmes (economic and employment policies) and stability or convergence programmes (fiscal policies) for this year.

The Council also agreed to forward a [draft recommendation](#) on the economic policy of the euro area to the European Council.

¹ Economic and Financial Affairs Council, Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council, Competitiveness Council, Environment Council and Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council

Implementation of the better law-making agreement

The Council was informed by the presidency on the progress in implementing the better law-making agreement concluded in 2016 by the Council, the European Parliament and the Commission.

The main purpose of the better law-making agreement is to improve the way in which the European Union legislates to ensure that EU laws better serve citizens and businesses.

The presidency focused in particular on the upcoming exchange of views with the European Parliament and the Commission on the implementation of the [joint declaration](#) on the EU's legislative priorities for 2017, agreed between the three institutions at the end of 2016.

The three institutions agreed to give priority treatment to legislative initiatives in the following six policy areas: (1) jobs, growth, investments; (2) social Europe; (3) security; (4) reforming migration policy; (5) digital single market; (6) energy and climate.

Mid-term review of the multiannual financial framework 2014-2020

The Council agreed to adjust the EU's multiannual financial framework (MFF) for 2014-2020 to bring it in line with new priorities ([14942/16](#) + [7030/17](#) + [7031/17](#) + [7031/17 ADD 1](#) + [7031/17 ADD 2](#)).

The agreed changes reinforce the EU's support for tackling the migration crisis, strengthening security, boosting growth and creating jobs. They will allow the EU to respond more easily to unexpected needs without changing the MFF expenditure ceilings. And they will help to avoid an excessive backlog of unpaid bills.

The revised MFF will provide additional €6.01 billion for the main priorities over the years 2017 to 2020. €2.55 billion will be available to address migration, reinforce security and strengthen external border control. €1.39 billion will stand ready for tackling the root causes of migration, and €2.08 billion will help stimulate growth and create jobs through a number of highly effective programmes such as the youth employment initiative (+€1.2 billion), Horizon 2020 (+€200 million), and Erasmus+ (+€100 million).

The revised MFF also improves the EU's capacity to respond more quickly to unexpected needs. To this end, the amounts for the emergency aid reserve and the flexibility instrument will be increased (by an average of €23 million and €45 million per year respectively) for the years 2017-2020. It will also become possible to transfer unused amounts from one special instrument to another: amounts equivalent to the resources remaining unused under the European globalisation adjustment fund and the EU's solidarity fund will be made available under the flexibility instrument.

To counter the risk of an excessive backlog of unpaid bills, the scope for recycling unused payments from one year to the following years will be increased. The Council also undertook to take any steps needed to avoid the excessive accumulation of unpaid bills.

The MFF regulation sets out annual maximum amounts which the EU is allowed to spend on different policy areas over the period from 2014 to 2020. It translates political priorities into figures, ensures budgetary discipline for the EU and facilitates the adoption of the annual EU budget.

The revised MFF regulation still needs the consent of the European Parliament before it can be adopted by unanimity by the Council.

OTHER ITEMS APPROVED

JUSTICE AND HOME AFFAIRS

Schengen – checks at external borders

The Council adopted a regulation amending the Schengen borders code to reinforce checks against relevant databases at the external borders.

[Schengen borders code: Council adopts regulation to reinforce checks at external borders](#)

Directive on combating terrorism

The Council adopted the Directive on combating terrorism.

For more information, [see press release](#).

European Border and Coast Guard Agency – former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

The Council adopted a decision authorising the opening of negotiations on an agreement between the EU and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia on actions carried out by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency on the territory of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

European Border and Coast Guard Agency – Republic of Serbia

The Council adopted a decision authorising the opening of negotiations on an agreement between the EU and the Republic of Serbia on actions carried out by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency on the territory of the Republic of Serbia.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS**Sanctions in view of the situation in Sudan**

The Council amended the restrictive measures in view of the situation in Sudan. On 12 January 2017, the United Nations updated the information relating to four persons subject to restrictive measures. The Council decision adopted today transposes this update by the UN. The sanctions were introduced by the Council in May 2005 after serious concerns were expressed about the situation in Sudan. Sanctions are targeted against individuals who impede the peace process, constitute a threat to stability in Darfur and the region or commit violations of international humanitarian or human rights law.

Sanctions in view of the situation in South Sudan

The Council amended the restrictive measures in view of the situation in South Sudan. On 12 January 2017, the United Nations updated the information relating to 6 persons subject to restrictive measures. The Council decision adopted today transposes this update by the UN. Sanctions were introduced in July 2014 after serious concerns were expressed about the situation in South Sudan. Sanctions are targeted against persons obstructing the political process in the country.

Sanctions in view of the situation in the Central African Republic

The Council amended the restrictive measures against the Central African Republic (CAR). On 12 January 2017, the United Nations updated the information relating to 10 persons and two entities subject to restrictive measures. The Council decision adopted today transposes this update by the UN. The sanctions were introduced by the Council in December 2013 after deep concern was expressed regarding the situation in the CAR.

Sanctions against Somalia

The Council amended the restrictive measures against the Somalia. On 12 January 2017, the United Nations updated the information relating to 12 persons and one entity subject to restrictive measures. The Council decision adopted today transposes this update by the UN. The sanctions were introduced by the Council in February 2009. The sanctions are targeted against persons or entities who seek to prevent or block a peaceful political process in Somalia.

Sanctions against the Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Council amended the restrictive measures against the Democratic Republic of Congo. On 12 January 2017, the United Nations updated the identifying information relating to 30 persons and 9 entities subject to restrictive measures. The Council decision adopted today transposes this update by the UN. The sanctions were introduced by the Council in June 2005 in view of worrying political developments and violence in the DRC.

Sanctions regarding the situation in the Republic of Guinea-Bissau

The Council amended the restrictive measures directed against certain persons, entities and bodies in view of the situation in Guinea-Bissau. The United Nations updated the information concerning 11 persons subject to restrictive measures. The Council decision adopted today transposes this update by the UN. The sanctions were introduced by the Council in May 2012. The sanctions are targeted against those who seek to prevent or block a peaceful political process or who take action that undermines stability in the Republic of Guinea-Bissau.

Sanctions regarding the situation in Afghanistan

The Council amended the restrictive measures directed against certain persons, entities and bodies in view of the situation in Afghanistan. On 12 January 2017, the United Nations updated the information relating to the persons and entities subject to restrictive measures. The sanctions were introduced by the Council in August 2011. The sanctions are targeted against individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with the Taliban in constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan.

International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) – Environmental protection

The Council approved an information note containing recommended EU positions for the next meeting of the ICAO Council (20 February to 10 March 2017), so that the information note can be used as the basis for the interventions of the representatives of the EU countries which are members of the ICAO Council.

ENLARGEMENT

Cooperation and verification mechanism

The Council adopted conclusions on the cooperation and verification mechanism for Bulgaria and Romania ([7048/17](#)).

HEALTH

Medical devices and in vitro diagnostic medical devices – adoption of two regulations

The Council adopted two regulations improving the safety of medical devices and of in vitro diagnostic medical devices ([10728/16](#) + [10728/16 COR 1](#) + [10728/16 ADD 1](#) + [10729/16](#) + [10729/16 COR 1](#) + [10729/16 ADD 1](#)).

The new regulations will enhance patients' health and provide disabled persons with a better quality of life while ensuring that patients get timely access to innovative healthcare solutions.

Medical devices and in vitro diagnostic medical devices help diagnose, prevent and treat or alleviate diseases. They cover a wide range of products, from sticking plasters to hip replacements and hearing aids, and from pregnancy tests to HIV tests.

The new rules keep pace with recent technical developments. Their scope has been extended to cover certain products which do not have a specifically medical purpose, such as coloured contact lenses. The experiences with metal-on-metal artificial hips and faulty silicone breast implants has also been taken into account in the preparation of the new rules, in particular by requiring the systematic scrutiny of vital implants by medical experts.

For details see [press release](#)