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NOTE

from: General Secretariat of the Council
to: Delegations

Subject: Partial summary record of the meeting of the **Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI)** of the European Parliament, held in Brussels on 3 September 2014

The focus of the ENVI meeting chaired by Mr LA VIA (PPE, IT) was on the upcoming negotiation between Council and Parliament over GMOs, with the Rapporteur and MEPs across political groups expressing concern at what they see as legal weaknesses in the Council position and reaffirming a number of key elements of Parliament's position.

4. General budget of the European Union for the financial year 2015 - all sections

The committee adopted its draft opinion and budget amendments.

5. Hearings of Commissioners-designate

The adoption of questionnaires was postponed.

6. Possibility for the Member States to restrict or prohibit the cultivation of GMOs in their territory

A representative of the Italian Presidency of the Council presented the Council position adopted in July following the political agreement reached in June.¹

¹ Documents 10972/14, 11316/14, 11435/1/14 REV 1 ADD1+ 11435/1/14 REV 1 ADD1 COR1

The Rapporteur Ms RIES (ADLE, BE) recalled some of the elements of the Parliament's position which would in her view considerably improve the proposed text and which she considered should be better taken into account.

She referred in particular to the list of possible grounds that can be used by member states to restrict or prohibit the authorisations, which in her view had been considerably weakened in the Council's text. She was of the view that the list proposed by Parliament was more adequate and specific. She recalled Parliament's preference for Article 192 TFEU as the legal base, wondered what was behind the choice of a Directive instead of a Regulation and expressed concerns at the way Phase I would function in the proposed legislative setup.

Ms KOSTINGER (EPP, AT), whilst welcoming the Council position and the two-phase approach as an improvement, expressed serious concerns at the legal security offered by the proposed setup to the countries wishing to restrict GMO crops on their soils when faced with the pressure of GMO multinationals. She further referred to the serious issue of coexistence between GMOs and traditional GMO-free crops, which in her view was not properly addressed.

Mr PARGNEAUX (S&D, FR) largely echoed the two previous interventions on the need for legal certainty. He called for extending the list of grounds and making it more specific to avoid Member States' decisions being exposed to legal action or WTO panels. He suggested introducing liability rules in case of damage caused by GMO crops and more stringent rules for risks assessments.

Mr STAES (Greens, BE) supported Ms RIES's statement on the need to take account of the Parliament's proposals, referred to Mr Juncker's statement in July on the need to review procedures for GMO approvals, referred to the need to tackle the issue of cross-border contamination.

Ms BOYLAN (GUE/NGL, IE) welcomed the Council position whilst stressing the need to correct its shortcomings. She advocated stronger rules for risks assessments, expressed serious concerns at the legal loopholes in the Council text, which she considered weak and leaving the door open for legal attacks by biotech companies. She stressed the need to uphold the precautionary principle rather than put the burden of proof on Member States; to recognize the environmental and agricultural impact of GMOS; to address the key issue of contamination; to provide for buffer zones between GMO cultivations and the other ones.

In the individual interventions which followed, MEPs largely echoed statements by the rapporteur and shadows. Several of them stressed the risks related to GMO cultures for biodiversity and traditional or biological cultures and criticized the attitude of biotech multinationals. Some recalled that the EFSA had been criticized for internal conflicts of interest with regard to the issue.

The Commission representative recalled that only 5 Member States were authorizing GMO cultures on their soil; that EFSA had done a lot to solve its internal conflicts of interest; that EU rules on scientific risk assessments were the most stringent in the world; that the phase I had been introduced to unblock the situation in the Council, but that the Commission did not intend to act as an intermediate in negotiations between Member States and multinationals, but solely as a kind of "post officer". Juncker's statement was a new position which needed to be further studied. He stressed that EU agriculture was highly dependent on imports of GMOs in the form of animal feeding and noted that a GMO-free EU would therefore entail a high cost.

The representative of the Council Presidency Ms VENTURELLI stressed that Phase I was not intended to be a negotiating phase with biotech companies, but was rather aiming at solving existing difficulties by providing flexibility and increased legal certainty.

The Chair outlined the timetable for the examination of the proposal: deadline for amendments: 14 October, ENVI vote: 5-6 November, plenary vote at the plenary session in January 2015.

7. European Semester for economic policy coordination: implementation of 2014 priorities

The Rapporteur for the opinion Mr GERBRANDY (ADLE, NL) presented his draft opinion. MEPs were broadly supportive and made a number of additional suggestions.

The Commission representative indicated that the Council had expressed support for including resource efficiency in the European Semester process. Council Conclusions were under preparation on the issue. The greening of the European semester would remain high on the agenda.

The rapporteur agreed for including the issue of health in his draft opinion following a request by his colleagues and invited them to use their influence to advocate the inclusion of greening elements in the European semester.

8. EU Alcohol Strategy: State of play

At the initiative of Ms WILLMOTT (S&D, UK), who stressed the need to keep momentum on the issue, there was a brief exchange of views with a Commission representative, who clarified that no decision had been taken yet as to the development of a new strategy or the extension of the previous one. The EU was building on existing tools. He announced a scoping paper to be the basis for a discussion on the way forward with the new Commissioner to be appointed soon.

10. Exchange of views with Mr Janez Potočnik, Commissioner for the Environment on the "Circular Economy Package"

Commissioner Potočnik presented the background and the Communication recently issued on the "Circular Economy Package".

Mr FLORENZ (EPP, DE) stressed the need for being more ambitious on this essential and future-oriented policy. He regretted the lack of incentives to resource efficiency. There should in his view be no more waste and no more landfills in future, as everything can be re-used and re-cycled.

Mr GROOTE (S&D, DE) regretted that the importance of the issue of resources was not yet fully recognized. Yet demand for primary resources was rising and a strategy was needed. He referred to food waste as a scandal which required concrete action through legislation. On landfills, progress should be done through a step-by-step approach.

Mr DUNCAN (ECR, UK) criticized the impact assessment as partial and simplistic, with assumptions based on best expectations, something which did not reflect reality on this issue.

Mr GERBRANDY (ALDE, NL) stated that resource efficiency was a clear example of where economy and the environment were meeting. The issue could be the source of great potential savings. He wondered about the timetable to reach the proposed objectives and suggested to better use the efficiency indicators in the European Semester exercise.

Ms KONECKA (GUE, CZ) stressed the need for educating people on the importance of resource efficiency.

In their individual interventions, MEPs stressed in particular the political and economic difficulties to make progress on the issue in times of crisis.

In reply, Commissioner Potocnik stressed that the issue should be seen as an economic opportunity, especially since the jobs at stake could not be delocalized, and

- Agreed that the objective was to stop providing financial support for landfills, except in very specific situations;
- Agreed that reducing food waste was essential, but noted that the issue was more complex than one could imagine. The target was a 30% reduction by 2025.
- Stressed that the impact assessment was actually under-estimating the benefits of a circular economy;
- In relation to the opinion on the European Semester, agreed that resource efficiency was a core issue for competitiveness, and that if labour conditions were not to be affected, then the only way to increase competitiveness was to look at energy and other resources' productivity.

He concluded that the package was a decent one that would make the difference in Europe.

11. Exchange of views with Mr Tonio Borg, Commissioner for Health on the Ebola crisis in West-Africa

Commissioner Borg informed MEPs on the state of play with regard to EU's action in support of the countries affected by the virus. He noted that the outbreak had led to the collapse of health systems in the countries concerned and to a disruption in their economy.

The EU civil protection mechanism had been activated, so that Member States could deliver aid in kind. The EU was cooperating with the WHO, MSF, the Red Cross and NATO. The Emergency Coordination Center was mobilized under the leadership of Commissioner Georghieva. Three mobile laboratories had been sent by the Commission. The Commission's intention was to increase funding by channelling development funds for humanitarian purposes.

He stressed that the risk of the disease spreading in Europe remained low, but that all competent authorities should remain vigilant.

Most of interventions by MEPs focused on the need to provide adequate funding for research aimed at preventing such epidemics, and on the need for an adequate EU preparedness to tackle such situations. They expressed concerns at potential sanitary risks and at a lack of EU preparedness. They were particularly concerned at budgets cuts in this context and at the risk for the EU to lose competitiveness in the field of medical research and the development of vaccines as a result.

Commissioner Borg reassured MEPs that research funding and the handling of the emergency was adequate in spite of budgetary cuts. He provided details on the action led by the Health security committee to coordinate action at EU level on travel advise, medical evacuation and other aspects related to prevention.

12. Any other business

13. Next meetings

- 24 September 2014, 9.00 – 12.30 and 15.00 – 18.30 (Brussels)
- 25 September 2014, 9.00 – 12.30 and 15.00 – 18.30 (Brussels)
