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NOTE

from: General Secretariat
to: Delegations

Subject: Summary record of the meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC
1 – 2 February 2015 in Riga

A fruitful COSAC chairpersons' meeting, with brief and frank interventions, and a focus on practical proposals. Of note is the suggestion by the Dutch House of Representatives that national parliaments share their priorities with regard to the Commission's annual work programme and set up a working group to improve the yellow card procedure.

Mr Timmermans focused on finding practical solutions to enhancing relations between the Commission and national parliaments, while discussions on Ukraine went beyond a mere reiteration of national positions, covering debates over the need to provide military assistance and the slow pace of reform.

Debrief on initiatives launched by the Dutch House of Representatives

Mr Leegte (Dutch House of Representatives) briefed chairs on the outcome of an informal meeting organised by his chamber on 19 January 2015:

- 14 different chambers supported the idea of national parliaments (NPs) **sharing a list of their priority files** in the Commission's annual work programme, and submitting the results to the COM and the EP before 1 April. For the greatest priority files, a leading ('champion') parliament would be appointed to lead the follow-up. Mr Leegte also suggested that the Monday morning meetings of parliamentary representatives in the EP could provide a suitable forum for proposals which did not fall within the work programme.
- On the **yellow card**, the chambers decided to set up a working group to discuss improvements (not involving Treaty change), particularly with regard to its scope and deadlines. The Polish parliament proposed to be the 'champion' parliament on this issue and to soon host a discussion on the matter in Warsaw.
- The group also discussed a potential **green card** (which would enable national parliaments to make suggestions for legislative proposals to the Commission). In a letter to Commissioner Timmermans¹, the Latvian Saeima summarised the findings, reiterating that the mechanism was not incompatible with the Treaties and that a common vision of the green card would be presented at the COSAC plenary meeting in June in Riga. In his written reply, Commissioner Timmermans indicated that the Commission was already ready to take good note of any constructive suggestion from national parliaments. He favoured this more pragmatic approach as opposed to a " complex discussion on procedures and new institutional arrangements not foreseen by the Treaty".

Lord Boswell (UK House of Lords) stressed that the green card was not a revolutionary proposal. It would not take away NPs' responsibility to scrutinise their government, nor would it undermine the Commission's right of initiative, or usurp the powers of the EP. In order to preserve the momentum, he encouraged NPs to mention issues that they would like to be the subject of a green card, and to share their thoughts with the other parliaments.

¹ <http://www.cosac.eu/53-latvia-2015/meeting-of-the-chairpersons-of-cosac-1-2-february-2015/>

The Luxembourg Chamber of Deputies indicated the future Presidency's continued interest in both the yellow and the green card, and the French National Assembly applauded the proactive - rather than reactive - role that a green card would offer NPs. The EP was asked if it wished to comment on the matter, but it declined.

Priorities of the Latvian Presidency

Ms Zanda Kalnina-Lukasevica, Parliamentary Secretary of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stressed the need to engage national parliaments in the EU system. The Latvian Presidency intended to focus on bringing the EU closer to its citizens in the early stages of the legislative process, improving interaction with the Commission, and ensuring the translation of all background documents. It also intended to examine how to fully exploit the current treaty provisions and to improve the yellow card mechanism. She applauded the practice of the Commission frequently visiting national parliaments and advocated good relations between MEPs and MPs. She subsequently discussed the specific priorities of the Presidency, which involved creating a "more competitive, digital and engaged Europe".

First Vice-President Timmermans

Mr Timmermans welcomed the very focused priorities of the Latvian Presidency, which were fully in line with the Commission's work programme. He hoped that in the future the EP could also agree to a joint approach on programming.

He stressed the "new start" for the Commission, where it would focus on big things and break away from some of the practices of the past. This included withdrawing 80 initiatives to reduce regulation, and engaging in a political dialogue with national parliaments, particularly if a yellow card is triggered (despite this not implying that the Commission would automatically withdraw its proposal).

With regard to the **green card**, he reiterated what he mentioned in his letter, underscoring the importance of not changing the treaties, but fully exploiting the potential of existing provisions. He also invited chairs to explore ways to improve cooperation among themselves and with the Commission. He emphasised the importance of national parliaments being fully engaged in the effort to addressing citizens' concerns over the EU. Lastly, he claimed that challenges to the economy and to security had to be faced rapidly by a united Europe - and not by MS acting alone.

The issue of TTIP and Greece largely dominated the subsequent round of questions:

- **TTIP:** Ms HÜBNER (MEP, EPP, AFCO chair) regarded the agreement as one of grand strategic relevance. She reiterated that if no agreement could be reached between the EU and the US, other big economic powers would decide standards for them, and would give them no scope for negotiation. Mr KOPF (AT) was critical of the closed-door negotiations that contributed to TTIP's negative perception, and Mr MAHOUX (BE) warned against a lowering of social and environmental standards.
- **Greece:** Mr CASH (UK) claimed that Mr Moscovici's statement that democracy in Greece would have to take second place compared to Greece's commitment, contrasted with the general indifference from the EU when FR and DE breached the Stability and Growth Pact. He stated that the endemic problem of the EU crisis required a real change to the EU architecture. Mr HANNIGAN (IE) was opposed to any favourable treatment for Greece's debt repayment, arguing that all members needed to respect the conditions to ensure stability and fairness. Mr KIRCHBAUM (DE) echoed this claim.

In his replies on **TTIP**, Mr Timmermans urged for "a dose of common sense", encouraging members to look at the facts and not give in to scaremongering (for example, ISDS was presented as the end of rights for individual citizens, but people tended to forget that almost all bilateral trade agreements included ISDS clauses).

On **Greece**, he supported the principle of "pacta sunt servanda". While acknowledging the tremendous level of suffering in Greece, he stressed that one could not disregard the huge show of solidarity from across the EU.

In reply to questions on the need for an **overhaul of the EU's architecture**, and on **the rule of law**, the Commissioner stated that the answer to all the EU's problems was not simply that of enhancing national parliament participation. Euroscepticism needed to be addressed by all players. He added that the rise of anti-Semitism, homophobia, islamophobia and regression in terms of gender equality also needed to be addressed if the EU was to have a future.

On the **ECHR**, Mr Timmermans claimed that the Commission was still studying the Court's opinion, but he stressed the Commission's commitment to the EU's accession to the ECHR.

The Eastern Partnership and the challenges ahead

The keynote speakers were Mr AHLIN (Speaker of the Swedish Riksdag), Mr RINKEVICS (Latvian Minister for Foreign Affairs) and Mr SEMERAK (Ukrainian MP, Deputy Chairman of the European Integration Committee).

Mr AHLIN gave a very frank description of the situation. He claimed that the **Eastern Partnership** was not a geopolitical fight against Russia, and warned against a military solution to Ukraine. He added that Russia suffered from "a post-imperialistic power syndrome" and despite the limited success of sanctions, this was the right way ahead. In addition, improving the lives of the people in Ukraine would inevitably have an effect on Russians who would expect the same standards from Moscow. He expressed, however, disappointment with the slow pace of change in Ukraine.

Mr RINKEVICS focused his intervention on the need to send a positive signal of commitment to the **Eastern Partnership**. Reforms could be requested from Ukraine, but not without assistance. The Latvian Presidency would address the issue of visa liberalisation at an upcoming Riga Summit. Despite recent events prompting calls for this to be delayed, the EU had to respect its commitments if the countries fulfilled the necessary criteria for visa liberalisation. As to countries like Armenia that preferred not to align themselves with the EU under an association agreement, an agreement covering areas where cooperation was possible should be considered.

Mr SEMERAK thanked members for the solidarity and support Ukraine had received, and described the first package of reforms that the new government had just adopted. He added that cooperation with the EU was the best incentive for reforms. As to military cooperation and the potential US supply of defensive weapons to Ukraine, Mr SEMERAK felt that there were other ways to solve the conflict, by equalising it, stopping the fire and working together to secure Russia's commitment to the Minsk Agreement.

- *Next steps*: the COSAC plenary will take place from 30 May - 2 June 2015 and will deal with **trade, energy and the future of parliamentary scrutiny** (the green card and the role of national parliaments in shaping the Commission's multiannual work programme).