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NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Council

Subject: Informal meeting of Ministers responsible for Cohesion Policy in Vilnius on 26 November 2013
- Presidency conclusions

With a view to the debriefing at the General Affairs Council on 17 December 2013 delegations will find attached the Presidency conclusions of the Informal meeting of Ministers responsible for Cohesion Policy which took place in Vilnius on 26 November 2013.

Informal Meeting of Ministers responsible for Cohesion Policy
Vilnius, 26 November 2013

Presidency Conclusions

On 26 November 2013, Ministers responsible for Cohesion Policy met in Vilnius to discuss the progress made by Member States in applying new elements of thematic concentration, ex-ante conditionalities, strengthened performance orientation and improved co-ordination of European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds when preparing new generation (2014-2020) investment programmes.

The Commissioner for Regional and Urban Policy, the Chairperson of the Committee on Regional Development of the European Parliament, representatives of the Committee of the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the European Investment Bank participated in the meeting. The meeting was also attended by the delegations from Norway and Switzerland, as well as directors of the European Institute for Gender Equality, European Policies Research Centre and the Secretary General of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions.

Ministers and the representatives of the European Parliament and European Commission welcomed the conclusion of negotiations on the legislative package for Cohesion Policy, which took more than two years of joint efforts of all the institutions to accomplish. They were looking forward to finalisation of remaining tasks, including delegated and implementing acts, and emphasised the relevance of debates on programming and implementation as proposed by the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council.

The Ministers engaged in an open exchange of views on the basis of questions presented in the Presidency Issues Paper prepared for this informal meeting in order to facilitate the discussion.

The debate demonstrated that reformed Cohesion policy based on thematic concentration, ex-ante conditionalities, better coordination of funds and policies as well as on performance orientation should help to substantially improve the quality of Cohesion policy investments.

The Presidency Conclusions of the ministerial discussion structured according to the main issues addressed by the Ministers are as follows:

- (1) It is important to ensure compatibility between requirements for thematic concentration and the general objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth on the one hand, and national investment planning frameworks and development needs, on the other. Thematic concentration is strongly supported but should be adapted to national and regional contexts, especially in countries where ESI Funds financing makes up a large share of public investments or in countries undergoing significant budgetary consolidation.
- (2) Timely and effective implementation of reforms in various policy areas should contribute to the effectiveness of Cohesion Policy. However, in some areas meeting the requirements of ex-ante conditionality seems to be challenging and requires more administrative effort than initially expected.
- (3) Quantifiable results and the introduction of obligatory common indicators should help to assess the efficiency of Cohesion Policy and communicate it to the public. However, in strengthening the orientation of the policy towards measurable and directly attributable results, the constraints on what is measurable must be recognised. A balance between ambition and reality needs to be found when setting the values for indicators, while financial corrections resulting from not achieving them should be applied only as a last resort option.

- (4) Improved co-ordination between the ESI Funds and integrated approach towards territorial development is important element to increase synergies and complementarities of investments from different funds and policies. Support was reiterated for greater coordination of the Funds and policies under the Common Strategic Framework. Partnership Agreements should contain provisions for better cooperation and coordination among all the policies covered and the different political and administrative levels concerned. The possibility to design multi-fund Operational Programmes was widely supported. The widespread use of Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs) and Community-Led Local Development was anticipated, with a particular focus on ITIs in urban areas. Better coordination of different EU funding sources should open up wider opportunities and simpler access for beneficiaries.

- (5) As an important horizontal issue, legal certainty and consistency in approach across countries and programmes, both in interpreting ESI rules as well as in other areas, such as state aid and environmental policy, was mentioned, stressing that efforts to simplify implementation should continue.

- (6) In the future it is important to keep exchanging experience systematically, also within the Council, concerning programming and implementation, including presentations of best practises and examples.
