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From: Presidency
To: Delegations
Subject: Annual Programming
– Letter by the Presidency

Delegations will find attached the letter sent by the President of the General Affairs Council to the President and First Vice-President of the Commission following the General Affairs Council on 13 October 2015.



LE GOUVERNEMENT
DU GRAND-DUCHÉ DE LUXEMBOURG
Ministère des Affaires étrangères
et européennes

Le Ministre

Luxembourg, 13 October 2015

Dear President,
Dear First Vice-President,

*Cher Jean-Claude,
Cher Frans,*

Let me take the opportunity to thank you for the letter of intent setting out the main elements guiding the preparation of the Commission's 2016 Work Programme. The Council welcomes the letter and the dialogue with the Commission in advance of the adoption of the Commission's Work Programme for 2016. This dialogue on priorities and initiatives is beneficial in view of reaching a common understanding of the challenges we face and the measures we have to deliver on jointly.

The Council has had a thorough exchange of views on the priorities set out for 2016. The Presidency would like to provide the following synthesis of the views expressed.

In the Council, there is continued support to a focused and prioritised programme of the Commission that meets the challenges facing the citizens and the EU as a whole. The consensus is that the overall priority areas of the Commission (the "10 priorities") are the right ones, in line with the Strategic Agenda adopted by the European Council. In particular, jobs and growth remain at the heart of the challenges the EU faces, hence the importance of the priorities that directly support this agenda: single market, digital single market and TTIP. Migration is evidently seen as a major priority, as are energy union and climate policy and the external dimension.

There is broad support in the Council to the policy initiatives and objectives stated in the letter of intent. The comments made during the Council debate were of three kinds, support for measures that were seen as particularly important, requests for additional initiatives or policy objectives, and expression of doubts on some of the proposed initiatives. As can be expected, there were nuances and sometimes divergent views in relation to individual initiatives.

Some more detailed observations can be made following the debate in the Council:

- There was wide support for the Commission's emphasis on growth and jobs (including the single market and digital aspects), but many delegations would like to see a bigger emphasis on research and development and innovation, considering that these areas are important in stimulating growth. In the same vein there were also calls for stronger action on the single market in services and on removing remaining barriers. Some delegations missed concrete initiatives on strengthening the industrial base (reshoring manufacturing).

There were many calls for action on SMEs and furthering investments, as well as fostering competitiveness of European companies. The same goes for unemployment (including youth unemployment). There were also some queries on the focus of the initiatives envisaged for the completion of the digital single market, which some considered to be too narrow.

- While Energy Union and climate change were both considered important in general, some delegations highlighted the former while others underlined the latter. There was a call for more prominence of the Energy Union, notably as concerns energy security. The preparation of and follow up to COP21 came up, including climate financing and implementation across the various policy sectors.
- The upcoming Labour Mobility Package (in particular the review of the posting of workers directive) was widely commented on, from different angles. There was emphasis on finding the right articulation between tackling abuse, not undermining the existing welfare systems and maintaining free movement of workers. It was also argued that enforcement of the existing rules should be the first priority before proceeding to a review.
- On the EMU, there were calls for more precision and detail. Some delegations questioned one or the other of the first-phase priorities for 2016, notably the European Deposit Scheme, but others on the contrary insisted on the urgency of those measures and asked for a concrete roadmap. The importance of the social dimension was underlined in the course of the debate as an important pillar.
- On migration, a lot of emphasis was put on the importance of a quick, determined and integrated approach and on the protection of external borders, with caveats on sovereignty issues; it was said that the issue of relocation goes hand in hand with that of external borders. Account should be taken of the latest developments including the results of the last European Council meeting. Some support was expressed for tackling the issue of legal migration.
- As concerns the external dimension, the upcoming review of the Security Strategy was in particular highlighted. This was however the area where it was most widely felt that some policies were missing from the letter of intent. In particular, there was the view that enlargement should remain on the EU agenda, with emphasis being put on the negotiations with Serbia. In the same vein neighbourhood policy was mentioned.
- Finally, as a more general point there was a wish to have more flesh in terms of policy content on some of the initiatives listed. In this context it was assumed that the Work Programme would provide the occasion for the Commission to elaborate further. The Commission was invited to consider including more detail in the letter of intent for the future.

Two important policy areas merit a particular mention:

- The MFF Review first. This was seen as an important exercise. The focus on simplification was generally welcomed, with some emphasis on effective and sustainable spending. But

there were also calls for caution, underlining that that the MFF review should not be used to reopen agreements found (e.g. ceilings and national envelopes) and that review and simplification should not be confused. The importance of the use of the flexibility instruments was mentioned, also in the context of tackling the current migration crisis. It was noted with regret that the letter of intent did not address the work of the High Level Group on own resources.

- The second concerned *REFIT*. The Council continues to strongly support the REFIT programme, emphasising the need for concrete results as well as the importance of a dialogue between the Council and the Commission. In this context, the need for transparency of the exercise continues to be important, e.g. by being more specific in the letter of intent about envisaged actions (in particular withdrawals). The need for safeguarding consumer, environment, health and employee protection was raised, as well as the need to ensure that REFIT contributes to the fulfilment of the objectives of the internal market.

The Council would highly appreciate if the Commission could take into account the views expressed around the table when finalising its work programme for 2016. It looks forward to continuing the dialogue with the Commission once the Annual Work Programme for 2016 has been adopted; this can be done at the November General Affairs Council.

Yours sincerely,


Jean ASSELBORN
President of the General Affairs Council

