

EPP Group Report

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European Council: not business as usual, but more ambitious plans

By Eduard Sloutweg

The European Parliament debated the upcoming European Council meeting on 1-2 March with Nicolai Wammen, President-in-Office of the Council, and Maroš Šefčovič, Vice-President of the European Commission, at this month's plenary session.

The Chairman of the EPP Group, Joseph Daul (F), outlined the Group's priorities.

According to him, the EU needs a package such as the Marshall Plan after the war, or the Internal Market project of 1992. "We need measures to restore confidence in the good management of our finances. The Treaty which will be signed next month will be one of the cornerstones."

"My Group expects the European Commission to propose a legislative package to mobilise all our resources to restore growth and employment. This package could include measures as ambitious as completing the Internal Market. We need to know which countries are still blocking this market, the Single Market Act, the Services Directive or the European Patent, all blocked by an absurd dispute about location."

"It must also foresee a lighter burden for our companies, whose competitiveness is suffering, but who must then commit to employing new people, young people in particular."

Joseph Daul regrets the statement by Neelie Kroes, Vice-President of the European Commission, who said that "there would be absolutely no man overboard if Greece left the Euro" and asked President Barroso for clarification on the European Commission's position: "We need measures to restore confidence in the governance of the Euro, and this can't come with contradictory statements."

Annual Growth Survey 2012 - strengthening economic policy

By Marion Jeanne

The sovereign debt crisis that some Eurozone countries are going through has revealed how badly economic and budgetary coordination is needed between Eurozone members and in the EU.

To tackle these issues, the European Union is in the process of adopting several new tools aimed at strengthening economic policy coordination and preventing future debt crises from occurring.

Among these tools, the European Semester is destined to co-ordinate the economic and fiscal policies of the Member States by identifying the policy actions and especially the need for structural reforms, as well as insuring that the Member States' budgets remain sustainable in the long-run. The Annual Growth Survey 2012 (AGS) is the first step in the European Semester. The European Commission's AGS findings were that many of the Member States did not sufficiently implement the measures agreed upon in the first round of the AGS, which concerned the year 2011, with structural reforms lagging particularly behind.

"With its contribution to the AGS, the European Parliament is calling on the Member States to effectively implement the policy measures that they have committed to", said Jean-Paul Gauzès (F). With state coffers being emptied and the markets showing reluctance to finance further public deficits, growth has to be generated through measures that aren't generating further state expenditures, such as carrying out structural reforms and the completion of the Single Market. These measures should specifically target a way out of the sovereign debt crisis. They should go hand in hand with strengthening economic growth and improving competitiveness to promote a sustainable and job-creating economy.

Food Aid: One billion Euros for EU's poorest

By Katarzyna Klaus

The European Parliament approved a compromise deal this week to continue the EU's Food Distribution Programme until 2013. The annual ceiling for food aid for the most needy is €500m per year. The EPP Group is a strong advocate of the programme, as the number of poor people in Europe has increased. More than 18 million of the most deprived persons in 20 Member States are to benefit from the programme.

"This scheme is confirmation that the European Union feels responsible towards its citizens. The economic crisis which our countries are witnessing affects

deprived persons the most. These are people who live in the most difficult conditions, the unemployed, the elderly, the handicapped, but also large families and single parents", said Czesław Siekierski (PL), Rapporteur for the Food Distribution Programme in the Union.

The Chairman of the EPP Group in the European Parliament Joseph Daul (F) added: "Charity begins at home: we cannot be consistent in helping people outside the EU and confusing when it comes to our European citizens. Food aid programmes must be extended beyond 2013. This year in the European Union when the weather hit us hardest, the food stocks made available by the European food aid programmes are at the lowest. We cannot allow a repetition of this in the future."

The Food Distribution Programme was established in 1987 under the Common Agricultural Policy. At the time, the Council decided to release public stocks of surplus food for use as food aid in the EU. The programme celebrates its 25th anniversary this year.

"Around 40 million people in Europe live in poverty. Therefore we should do everything possible to prepare the appropriate legal basis for the programme for the years 2014-2020", concluded Mr Siekierski.

Radio Spectrum: do we want to be the best?

By Gunnar Larsson

"I might be biased, but I would say that this is one of the few reforms which will increase competitiveness", Gunnar Hökmark (S) said concluding a press conference following a vote in plenary on his Report on Radio Spectrum. Few might be aware of what radio spectrum is, but most use it every day. Simply put, it is frequencies used to transmit everything from mobile phone calls to television broadcasts.

With the arrival of digital television, there is now plenty of space left for other use, such as mobile broadband. Mr Hökmark, now supported by both Parliament and Council, would like to make the 800 MHz frequency band available for the use of wireless broadband services already next year. In addition, 1,200 MHz should be allocated for wireless services by 2015.

Taking part in the plenary debate on his Report, Gunnar Hökmark asked a rhetorical question: "Do we want to be number one, or do we want to be number two, three or even four?" Europe's previously undisputed leadership in telecoms, with companies such as Siemens, Ericsson and Nokia, is suddenly being highly contested. On bigger markets outside Europe, be it the US or China, the cost of developing the next generation of technology can be swiftly recuperated. China's

state-owned telecommunications company can serve as an illustration, having a massive 650 million subscribers.

Releasing frequencies for mobile broadband is one way of keeping and improving Europe's competitiveness. New services will be available and the European knowledge economy will be characterised by vitality, change and innovation, according to the Swedish MEP.

Syria: violence against its own people will be the end of Assad's regime

By Eva Mitsopoulou

"The regrettable failure of the Security Council to condemn the Assad regime through the Russian and Chinese veto was perceived on the ground as a licence to use heavy weapons for the indiscriminate use of force resulting in many civilians, women and children dead or wounded", said Ioannis Kasoulides (CY), Vice-Chairman of the EPP Group responsible for Foreign Affairs, in the plenary debate on the situation in Syria.

Mr Kasoulides underlined that the EU's position is one of principle, unlike the position of the Russians, leading the country to a civil war: "Our position is the same as in all other Arab Spring countries. We cannot remain idle faced with a massacre on such a scale, this would be tantamount to a crime against humanity".

"No regime which turns its military might against its own people has survived and this one will not either", Mr Kasoulides concluded.

Speaking in the same debate on the situation in Syria, José Ignacio Salafranca (ES), pointed out that "once again, we have missed the opportunity for a more coordinated and effective response from the Member States. EU action has not been able to stop violence or to overcome the veto of Russia and China in the UN and this is highly regrettable." Mr Salafranca called on EU governments to increase their pressure on Russia and China and regretted the fact that this was not possible during the EU-China Summit.

Both MEPs commended the High Representative's statement for further sanctions and restrictive measures to be introduced and her intentions to get together with all the other interested international actors for a concerted action to end this intolerable repression. They also called for support for the Arab League initiatives to reinforce links with the Syrian opposition and the establishment of a humanitarian corridor and its plan for a political and peaceful transition and for UN/Arab League cooperation on the ground.

Structural Funds: reprogramming to combat youth unemployment?

By Katarzyna Klaus

The EPP Group welcomes the efforts exerted at all levels of European governance to get the most out of EU budget-supported policies. In this context, it was surprising to hear from the President of the European Commission that there is €82 billion of, as it was called, 'unspent' structural funds. Looking more carefully into this announcement, Danuta Hübner (PL), Chairwoman of the Regional Development Committee of the European Parliament, discovered that this is not really unspent money, but rather not-yet spent money.

Danuta Hübner, on behalf of the Regional Development Committee, asked Commissioner Johannes Hahn how the Commission is planning to re-programme the structural funds for 2012 and 2013 which have not yet been allocated in a legally-binding way.

"We fully share the view that the potential of cohesion policy to generate growth and jobs must be fully exploited. What is worrying, however, is that the way this proposal has been presented to public opinion. It has created false interpretations, unnecessarily undermining the image of the policy and its real impact on growth and job creation", said Danuta Hübner.

The conclusions of the informal European Council meeting of 30 January underlined that Europe needs more targeted efforts in the next few years to promote competitiveness of businesses and to ensure growth in Europe. Commissioner Hahn informed the EP that from the beginning of March there will be targeted discussions held between the EC and Member States. "However it is up to the Member States how they will adapt their programmes or not and focus more closely on countermeasures against extremely high youth unemployment and promoting SMEs", said Johannes Hahn.