



Italian Presidency priorities discussed by EP committees

Committees Committee on Constitutional Affairs, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development, Committee on Culture and Education, Committee on Development, Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs, Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety, Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection, Committee on International Trade, Committee on Industry, Research and Energy, Committee on Legal Affairs, Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, Committee on Fisheries, Committee on Regional Development, Committee on Transport and Tourism [25-09-2014 - 10:51]

"The priorities of the Italian Council Presidency were outlined to the various parliamentary committees by Italian ministers in a series of meetings held in July and September."

Single Market: stronger protection of consumers and fewer barriers

Enforcing consumer protection, striving to reach a deal in the Council on draft product safety laws, market surveillance, package travel and seeking a deal with Parliament on life-saving eCall rules will be the Presidency's priorities, Secretary of State for Economic Development Simona Vicarito told the Internal Market Committee on 24 September. Under-Secretary for European Affairs Sandro Gozi added that the Presidency will aim to get rid of barriers to the functioning of the single market, support the development of the digital economy and promote investment.

MEPs asked about possible compromises to break Council deadlock over the "made in" regulation, stressing that consumers should be enabled to make informed choices on what they buy. The Presidency should also focus on ensuring small firms' access to affordable funds, removing remaining barriers to the single market and promoting enforcement of the directive on services, they added. Finally, they also stressed the importance of passing simple messages to citizens on concrete examples of single market benefits and suggested concentrating on the digital single market and tackling digital exclusion.

Regional policy: General Affairs Council on 19 November

Europe still suffers from a "very serious economic and social situation", with high unemployment in many countries, so "growth-oriented actions" are needed, Graziano Delrio, State Secretary to the Prime Minister, told the Regional Development Committee on 22 September. In this context, he cited the benefits to be expected from the "remarkable financial resources for public investment in the 2014-2020 period" under Cohesion Policy, amounting, he said, to more than €450 billion, taking account of national co-financing, "a huge amount which will be fully used". "Cohesion Policy is the European Union's development policy", he added, saying that the Presidency would use it to revive the "Europe 2020" Strategy.

The Presidency intends to strengthen the focus on Cohesion Policy, scheduling a General Affairs Council specifically devoted to it on 19 November. Mr Delrio said: "The most relevant initiative at political level will lie in promoting a structured political debate on Cohesion Policy, which represents almost a third of the EU budget but does not have a regular and formal forum for debate within the Council". But he also insisted that "we need

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to reconcile rigorous management of public finances with the re-launch of investment for growth". The "funds must be used in an effective way - quality is as important as quantity", he said.

Transport and tourism: Package Travel Directive is a priority

Tourism is a real opportunity for growth and jobs EU wide, tourism minister Dario Franceschini told the Transport and Tourism Committee on Wednesday. As Presidency priorities, he cited developing a digital strategy to support tourist services and improving transport links to open up access less known but very attractive areas. The Presidency will also press for progress in the Council on the Package Travel Directive, with a view to achieving a second reading agreement with the Parliament, he added.

In their comments and questions, MEPs quizzed Mr Franceschini on ways to enhance "Europe" as a brand, while also highlighting the diversity European countries have to offer. Some underlined that tourism development must take account of environmental and social needs, while others stressed that measures to simplify visa application procedures must not compromise protection of EU citizens.

Legal Affairs: proper legal framework key for economic growth and competitiveness

The Presidency will aim to reach agreements with Parliament on revised rules for insolvency proceedings rules and trade mark legislation, justice minister Andrea Orlando and Secretary of State for European Affairs Sandro Gozi told the Legal Affairs Committee on 3 September. The Presidency also aims to make progress on proposals on European small claims procedures and protection of trade secrets. The Presidency will speed up work to reach a compromise on regulation simplifying acceptance of certain public documents in order to facilitate free movement of citizens within the EU, Mr Orlando added.

Mr Gozi highlighted the importance of making the regulatory framework more favourable for economic growth and competitiveness. Removing unnecessary bureaucracy and obstacles to cross-border business activities and protecting intellectual property rights and authors' rights are crucial, he told the MEPs. MEPs also asked how the Presidency intends to make progress on common European sales law proposals and improving the gender balance on company boards.

Fisheries: enforcing the discard ban

Rules to enforce the discard ban introduced by the new Common Fisheries Policy must be prepared as a matter of urgency, farm, food and forestry minister Maurizio Martina told the Fisheries Committee on 3 September. "We do not have much time to find an agreement", because the ban will apply from 2015 and existing fisheries legislation still has to be adapted to avoid inconsistencies in EU law from January, he explained. The Presidency will also focus on striking deals on fishing opportunities in 2015, continue working towards a Council position on the Deep Sea regulation and back the Commission's efforts to tackle the "worrying situation" of fish resources in the Mediterranean, he said. The Presidency had already contacted the Commission about possible fishing industry support measures to alleviate the effects of Russia's ban on fish imports from the EU, he added.

Culture and education: defend the European cultural exception and promote cultural exchanges and mobility

Defending the European cultural exception, in the context of protecting our heritage, is the Presidency's principal priority in the cultural field. EU countries need to agree on this, so as to make the cultural exception a long-term strategy for Europe, minister Dario Franceschini told the Culture and Education Committee on Wednesday. The mobility of young people in the cultural sector is another priority for the coming months: a project inspired by the Erasmus programme should enable exchanges of artists or young workers in museums, libraries or other cultural institutions in European countries, he added.

Free access for all to on-line content is the priority in the audiovisual and internet sector, said secretary of state for telecoms Antonio Giacomelli. The internet should be open to all and a medium of free exchange, he stressed. On youth and sport, secretary of state Luigi Bobba stressed that employability and mobility were essential. The Presidency backs

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efforts to combat match-fixing and the manipulation of sports results, he added.

The Presidency also plans to promote investment in education, said minister for education, universities and research Stefania Gianinni. The first three priorities announced on Thursday in the Culture Committee should help to promote growth in Europe. These priorities are: strengthening and developing dual education and training systems (with emphasis on vocational training, lifelong learning and teacher training); making better, more flexible use of funds from the new Erasmus+ programme in order to support international mobility, and stepping up support for higher education, notably doctoral studies.

Agriculture: Russia's EU food import ban, trade deals and milk

The Council's Italian Presidency will seek to expand "very rapid response" measures taken by the Commission so far to alleviate the effects of Russia's ban on food imports from the EU, farm minister Maurizio Martina told the Agriculture Committee on Wednesday. The Council may even work to strengthen existing tools to enable the EU to cope better with such crises in future, he added in reply to MEPs calling on him to do more to support EU farmers.

The Italian Presidency's key priorities will include reform of EU rules on organic farming, on which the Council could agree by the end of this year, and progress towards a balanced agreement on cultivating GMOs, said Mr Martina. He and his team will also try to speed up the legislative process for updating school fruit and milk schemes and will closely monitor dairy market developments with a view to finding ways to further help the milk sector once the quota system is abolished in 2015, he added.

The Presidency will also follow closely international trade negotiations, in particular for a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), he said, stressing that although the EU should focus on "opportunities these agreements might bring", it "should not hide their downsides".

International trade: more transparency on TTIP talks with the USA

Three now global trends need to be noted if trade policy is to deliver growth and boost the competitiveness of EU companies, deputy minister for economic development Carlo Calenda told the Trade Committee on 3 September.

These trends are, first, the shrinking production cost gap between developed and "third world" countries, which creates opportunities to relocate production back to the EU. Second, growing emerging economy protectionism, which divides the world between neo-protectionist countries and those that accept free market rules. And third, the exponential growth in global demand for quality manufactured goods, which is an opportunity that EU firms must seize if the "ambitious but not unrealistic" goal of these goods making up 20% of EU GDP by 2020 is to be met.

MEPs asked Mr Calenda about how to ensure that the EU member states do not delay the development of common trade policy, either by blocking EU-wide trade law in the Council or by not ratifying the trade deals. Debate was dominated by the Transatlantic Trade and Investment partnership (TTIP) talks with the USA, which Mr Calenda called the EU's top trade priority, and in which he promised to strive for more transparency.

On trade relations with Russia and Ukraine, Mr Calenda said that when EU security is at stake, "foreign policy takes priority over trade policy". He also listed implementing the "Bali package" deal of world trade talks, market access for small and medium firms and trade talks with Vietnam and Japan as important trade agenda items.

Foreign affairs: enlargement and accession agreements

The Presidency's key challenge in the next six months is "the implementation of the association agreements with Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia", Foreign Minister Federica Mogherini told the Foreign Affairs Committee on Tuesday 2 September. "We support enlargement, but without artificially accelerating it", she continued, adding that religious

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freedoms, work on eradicating the death penalty and promoting women's rights are also on the Italian foreign policy agenda.

In questions MEPs asked Ms Mogherini to specify what concrete steps would be taken towards enlarging the EU to include Balkan countries and Turkey, and also how the EU should respond to the crises in Iraq, Syria and Gaza. The also asked how Italy itself would approach the Russia/Ukraine crisis.

Civil Liberties: migration and data protection among priorities

Tackling immigration with "actions that deliver results" in the short, medium and long terms, fighting human trafficking, corruption and terrorism and combating hate crime, xenophobia and discrimination are some of the Italian Presidency's key priorities in the home affairs area, said Interior Minister Angelino Alfano on Tuesday. Replying to Civil Liberties Committee MEPs' questions on border control and migration, he said that "responsibility and solidarity should go hand in hand" and stressed the need for stronger cooperation between the EU and African countries of origin and transit of migrants.

Data protection reform and the exchange of data with third countries, the European Public Prosecutor's Office and cooperation on criminal and civil matters are issues on which the Italian Presidency aims to make progress, said Justice Minister Andrea Orlando on Tuesday. "We will try to achieve a common approach during the Presidency" on data protection, he told MEPs, assuring them that the Presidency will take account of the "right to be forgotten", in the light of the recent European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruling. On data retention, he said that the Council is awaiting a Commission proposal in the aftermath of the ECJ ruling declaring the 2006 directive invalid.

Economic affairs: "refocus on factors that can create growth"

Economy and Finance Minister Pier Carlo Padoan presented a "three pillar" growth strategy focusing on improved market integration, structural reforms and investment to Economic and Monetary Affairs Committee MEPs on Tuesday. "The EU2020 strategy must be refocused on factors that can create growth", he said, adding that creating an EU long-term investment fund, combatting money laundering and tax evasion and introducing the Financial Transaction Tax will be key areas of legislative work.

Youth unemployment will also be high on the agenda, Mr Padoan assured MEPs who asked about possible EU Commission/ECB/IMF "Troika" reform, what the Presidency would do to relieve the credit squeeze, especially on small and medium-sized enterprises, and for his views on budget deficits and spending flexibility. In his replies, he stressed that much can still be gained by better enforcing existing rules and learning from best practices in other EU countries.

Transport: talks on 4th railway package to start soon

Transport and transport infrastructure are vital to the Presidency's key priorities of growth and employment, Infrastructure and Transport Minister Maurizio Lupi told the Transport and Tourism Committee on Tuesday, in a meeting which new chair Michael Cramer (Greens/EFA, DE) opened with a minute's silence for the victims of the crashed Malaysia Airlines flight MH17. The Presidency aims to start negotiations with Parliament on the 4th railway package "technical pillar" files and will press for progress in the Council on the "political pillar" too, he said. The Single European Sky (SES) proposals will have a big impact on the sector's industrial landscape and the Presidency will encourage discussion of the SES2+ package, he said. The Presidency also aims to complete negotiations with Parliament on the weights and dimensions of trucks dossier, and will pursue work on

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cross-border enforcement rules, he added.

MEPs asked Mr Lupi to clarify the timeline for progress with the railway package, stressing that negotiations on the "technical pillar" negotiations should start as soon as possible. They also inquired how progress could be achieved on the port services proposals, road safety, the airports package files, the e-call proposal and how transport policy could be placed at the heart of efforts to combat climate change.

Development: "Humanitarian advocacy is the Presidency's first priority in the development area"

"Humanitarian advocacy is the Presidency's first priority in the development area" Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Lapo Pistelli told the Development Committee on Tuesday. The Presidency will also focus on strengthening the link between humanitarian assistance and civil protection, improving protection for vulnerable groups in emergency situations, and stepping up private sector involvement in delivering humanitarian aid. Topics discussed with MEPs included budgetary constraints on EU humanitarian aid, the links between development policy and immigration, and prospects for the post-2015 development aid framework.

Employment: countering youth unemployment, poverty and social exclusion

The Presidency will pursue inclusive and sustainable growth to tackle employment challenges and "restore the trust of EU citizens", Labour and Social Policy Minister Guigliano Poletti told Employment Committee MEPs on Tuesday. MEPs welcomed the Presidency's ambitious agenda, which aims to counter youth unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. The Presidency aims, inter alia, to put a halt to undeclared work, help the unemployed by increasing their mobility through the EURES initiative and better protect seafarers. Mr Poletti said he was committed to reaching an agreement at Council level on these files.

MEPs agreed that tackling youth employment should be a key priority, but also asked for more concrete and appropriate measures. Stimulating the mobility of the workforce is not by itself a solution to unemployment, MEPs said, adding that enhanced mobility should be complemented by measures such as cutting red tape to help small firms to create more quality jobs. They also asked the Presidency to address mismatches of skills on the labour market through education and training, and underlined that the social dimension should not be secondary to attaining economic growth. Concluding the meeting, committee chair Thomas Händel (GUE/NGL, DE) stressed that both Parliament and the Presidency must ensure that the Commission's REFIT programme does not undermine existing employment and social rights.

Constitutional Affairs: call for more transparency

Putting fundamental rights back at the heart of the political agenda, responding to citizens' call for change in European elections, and tackling immigration were among the aims highlighted by Undersecretary of State for European Affairs Sandro Gozi when presenting the Presidency's priorities to the Constitutional Affairs Committee on Tuesday. He also stressed the need to review progress in implementing the Lisbon treaty and ways to boost inter-institutional cooperation.

MEPs also posed questions about increasing transparency, particularly of Council and Court of Justice proceedings, subsidiarity, the location of the seat of the European Parliament, the public EU register for lobbyists (transparency register) and improving the European Citizens' Initiative instrument.

Women's rights: getting more women onto company boards and re-opening talks on maternity leave

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Getting more women onto company boards, "re-opening dialogue" on the maternity leave directive, breaking deadlock over the anti-discrimination draft law and boosting gender equality in non-EU countries are some of the Presidency's key priorities in the women's rights and gender equality field, said Undersecretary of State for European Affairs Sandro Gozi told the Women's Rights and Gender Equality Committee on Tuesday.

Answering MEPs' questions on the presence of women in the next college of Commissioners, Mr Gozi said that "we are doing what we can to ensure that the Commission has at least nine or ten women". The Presidency will also look into the issue of gender-related violence, he told MEPs.

Environment and public health: energy security, GMOs, medical devices

"We need a cultural paradigm shift, and to make clear that growth and jobs can be created in the whole economy by being green" Environment Minister Gian Luca Galetti told the Environment Committee on Wednesday. Among other priorities, Mr Galetti cited the 2030 climate and energy targets, the reform of the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), energy security, and the preparation of the UN Climate Change conference to take place in Lima, Peru, in December.

The Presidency also intends to make "significant progress" on the GMO cultivation dossier, reducing consumption of plastic bags, the air quality package, monitoring maritime transport emissions, and the Indirect Land Use Change (ILUC) legislation.

Health Minister Beatrice Lorenzin said the Presidency will seek a compromise with Parliament on the medical devices and in vitro Diagnostic medical devices regulations, and if possible an early second reading agreement on official checks in the agri-food chain. The Presidency will also aim to reach an agreement within the Council on novel foods, she added. "Health is not a cost but an investment for our society" she stressed.

Industry, research and energy

Decarbonising energy in the EU, identifying specific measures to boost energy supply security and establishing stable relations with third country suppliers will be key priorities for the coming months, economic development minister Federica Guidi told the Industry, Research and Energy Committee on 2 September. State secretary for telecoms Antonello Giacomelli stressed the need to complete the digital single market, improve web accessibility and remove barriers to communication such as roaming.

Investing in research and training, achieving true mobility for researchers in the EU and promoting the "Partnership in Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area" (PRIMA) were among the priorities outlined by minister for education, universities and research Stefania Giannini.

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Contact

Federico DE GIROLAMO

BXL: (+32) 2 28 31389

STR: (+33) 3 881 72850

PORT: (+32) 498 98 35 91

EMAIL: stampa-IT@europarl.europa.eu