



Latvian Presidency priorities discussed by EP committees

[22-01-2015 - 14:32]

The priorities of Latvia's EU Council Presidency will be outlined to the various parliamentary committees by Latvian ministers in a series of meetings to be held during the last two weeks of January.

Industry, research and energy

The Presidency priority in the energy field is to develop a resilient energy union based on an interconnected internal energy market, energy governance, self-sufficiency and coordinated energy diplomacy, Minister for Economics Dana Reizniece-Ozola told the Industry, Research and Energy Committee on Thursday 22 January. For industry, its priorities include industrialisation and industrial competitiveness, digitisation and digital entrepreneurship, and tackling the difficulties that firms face in accessing funding.

Fisheries

Putting the new Common Fisheries Policy into practice, with a special focus on competitiveness and sustainability, is the Presidency's major priority in this field, Agriculture Minister Jānis Dūklavs told the Fisheries Committee on Thursday 22 January. The most pressing need here is to agree on the "landing obligation" regulation, in order to make the discard ban work, he said. The Presidency will also push for progress on the multi-annual management plans, in order to establish maximum sustainable yields for all stocks, he added.

MEPs acknowledged the urgent need to overcome the legal difficulties delaying the entry into force of the discard ban. They asked Mr Dūklavs how he planned to help resolve the dispute between Parliament and Council over the legal basis of the multiannual management plans, which have been blocked in the Council for years. He replied that the legislators would have to build on the results achieved so far by the inter-institutional task force, and that the Baltic Sea multiannual plan, if agreed upon, could become an example for future management plans. MEPs also raised the difficult issues of the proposed ban on driftnets and the deep-sea trawling law. Mr Dūklavs also announced that a special effort would be made to negotiate fisheries partnership deals with third countries, especially Mauritania, whose fisheries agreement with the EU expired in December.

Agriculture

A key Presidency priority is the organic farming regulation, Agriculture Minister Jānis Dūklavs told the Agriculture Committee on Wednesday 21 January, stressing that the Presidency will seek agreement in the Council and start negotiations with the Parliament as soon as possible to avoid having the proposal withdrawn by the Commission.

The Presidency will also focus on simplifying the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and making progress on the animal health and plant health regulations in "trialogue" talks with the European Parliament and Commission, he said. The Presidency will closely follow market developments with regard both to the Russian embargo on EU food products and in the dairy sector, given that milk quotas are to expire at the end of March 2015.

MEPs urged the Presidency to tackle the impending crisis in the dairy sector, press for more measures to help farmers hit by the Russian embargo and back Parliament's wish to

Press release

pursue work on reform of the EU school fruit, vegetable and milk scheme, despite the Commission's recommendation that legislative work on it be put on hold.

Employment and social affairs

An inclusive and sustainable labour market in Europe, fighting poverty, creating quality jobs, particularly for young people and people with disabilities, while also tackling the health and safety at work and gender equality issues will be the Presidency's key priorities, Welfare Minister Uldis Augulis told the Employment Committee on Wednesday 21 January.

MEPs welcomed the Presidency initiatives and urged Mr Augulis to press for legislation to be passed on the EU employment services network, thus improving labour mobility, but to include measures to prevent wage dumping. They also wanted more specific measures for integrating disabled job seekers in the labour market and reducing the gender gap in wages and pensions. Since employment policies are a matter for EU member states, the Presidency also pledged to promote better cooperation and EU-wide exchanges of best practices in fighting unemployment.

Environment - market stability reserve, biofuels

The Presidency is committed to creating a market reserve to improve the stability of the EU carbon market, Environment and Regional Development minister Kaspars Gerhards told the Environment Committee on Wednesday 21 January. Discussion would probably start early in the spring, he added.

On the reform of EU biofuels legislation, "we hope to achieve agreement between the two legislators, one that would create clarity for operators and for European biofuels policy, through a balanced approach to the sustainable generation of biofuels" Mr Gerhards said. He also emphasised the importance of pressing ahead with plans for cleaner air, e.g. to limit emissions of certain pollutants from medium-sized combustion plants, on which the Presidency aims to get an agreement with Parliament. National emission target ceilings and efficient use of natural resources could help to achieve this goal, he added.

Health - medical devices, alcohol strategy

Health Minister Guntis Belēvičs intends to begin negotiations with the European Parliament on reforming EU regulations on medical devices and in vitro diagnostic medical devices, he told the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee on Wednesday 21 January. "But it is clear that there are many areas where Council still has to find an agreement" he added. He mentioned measures against psychoactive substances and addictions as another priority, and undertook to start a debate on a new EU alcohol strategy: "it remains a competence of member states, but in recent years, there has been a discussion on having an integrated policy at EU level" he said. He also highlighted the issue of multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis. "it is mostly eradicated from the West, but does spread across borders, irrespective of lifestyles, and represents a threat to all of us", he said.

International trade

Work to further advance the multilateral trade system within the World Trade Organization and implementing plurilateral deals already done, trade talks with the USA, Japan and Vietnam are key trade priorities for the Presidency, Parliamentary State Secretary for European Affairs Zanda Kalniņa-Lukaševica said in a debate with the International Trade Committee on Wednesday 21 January.

MEPs stressed the need to push through pending international trade legislation. Some advocated bringing forward the implementation dates of trade deals already concluded with third countries. Others insisted that the Presidency should come up with a timetable for taking up the findings of the European Commission's public consultation on whether investor-to-state dispute settlement clauses should be included in the forthcoming

Press release

Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership deal with the USA.

Internal market

A more competitive and more digital Europe, further integrating the single market, improving enforcement of EU rules, and promoting mutual trust and free movement of goods and services will be the Presidency's key priorities, Economy Minister Dana Reizniece-Ozola told the Internal Market Committee on Wednesday 21 January.

Internal market MEPs welcomed the first-ever Latvian Presidency of EU Council and urged it to spare no effort to break Council deadlock over the "made in" regulation and the telecoms package. They backed the Presidency's pledges to advance digital single market initiatives, ensure that the services directive is properly implemented, and find compromises on network and information security and package travel rules.

Development

The Presidency's development priorities are tackling crises in Syria and Ukraine and the Ebola epidemic in Western Africa, Parliamentary State Secretary for European Affairs Zanda Kalniņa-Lukaševica told the Development Committee on Wednesday 21 January. MEPs urged Latvia to seize the opportunity of European Year for Development 2015 to push for an end to the "chronic underfinancing of development" and to strengthen the link between humanitarian and development aid by looking for long term solutions, such as investing in health care systems in African countries.

Justice and home affairs

Making progress on the data protection package, towards achieving a negotiating mandate for the Council, will be the Presidency's first priority, Justice Minister Dzintars Rasnačs, assured the Justice and Home Affairs Committee on Wednesday 21 January. Other priorities will be work on protecting the EU's financial interests and the rights of suspects in criminal law. Interior Minister Rihards Kozlovskis said the Presidency is open to dialogue to make progress on the EU PNR proposal, based on respect for human rights and freedoms. Work on updating the EU Internal Security Strategy and the new laws governing Europol and CEPOL will also continue, he added. On migration and asylum, he stressed the need for a common EU approach to human smuggling in the Mediterranean and said that work on a single asylum system must be taken further.

Replying to questions on the data protection package, Justice Minister Dzintars Rasnačs said that trialogues (three-way talks between Parliament, Council and Commission) should be possible only "after the June Council", but stressed member states' willingness to move ahead with this file.

On EU PNR proposal, Mr Kozlovskis mentioned that "good practices" on the use of PNR by member states who have already introduced their own systems should be discussed at the 29 January informal Justice and Home Affairs Council meeting. He assured MEPs that "the objective is to provide for data protection and respect for fundamental rights". On migration, he told MEPs that the Presidency would build on the work of previous presidencies and highlighted its plans to fight human smuggling.

Transport and tourism

"We want to make progress on the technical pillar of the 4th railway package our priority, but work on every part of it will continue" Transport Minister Andrijs Matīss told the Transport and Tourism Committee on Wednesday 21 January. The Presidency will pursue work on the Single European Sky 2+ package and air passenger rights, and also on the ports proposal, in which it will seek to ensure proper financial transparency and take account of the differing stages of development of member states' ports, he said. Investment in and development of the TEN-T network will be discussed at a ministerial meeting in March and the June Transport Council will address road safety issues, he announced.

Press release

MEPs stressed that the Gibraltar issue needs to be resolved to permit progress on aviation files. Some asked whether the Presidency would consider splitting the railway package, others how the introduction of minimum wages in Germany would affect transport operators from other member states operating in Germany. MEPs also quizzed Mr Matīss on his plans to address cuts in transport sector emissions and tackle social dumping in the transport sector.

Industry, research and energy

"Our approach is to reduce roaming charges gradually, as there are different conditions in the member states" said Transport Minister Anrijs Matīss, in a 21 January debate on Presidency priorities for the telecoms package and ICT. Three-party talks (Parliament, Council and Commission) could be held in March on the Network Information Security (NIS) proposals, with the aim of approving the directive by July, he suggested. The "digital agenda" is a Presidency priority and a Competition Council meeting in May will address the various aspects of this comprehensive topic, he announced.

Education and Science Minister Māriņe Seile presented the Presidency's four research and space priorities: linking the Innovation Union and the European Research Area, further developing the research area, the digital elements of research innovation, and a comprehensive space policy.

Constitutional affairs

A more active digital Europe, with better relations between EU institutions and citizens, is a key Presidency goal, Zanda Kalnina-Lukaševica, Parliamentary Secretary to the Latvian Foreign Minister, told the Constitutional Affairs Committee on Tuesday 20 January.

Striking the right balance between safety and transparency, EU accession to the Human Rights Convention and possible improvements to the citizen's initiative and interinstitutional cooperation between Parliament, Council and Commission were among the priorities discussed with MEPs.

Cohesion policy

Cohesion policy is still one of the most important investment policies geared to creating growth and jobs, Finance Minister Jānis Reirs told the Regional Development Committee on Tuesday 20 January, underlining that EU funds made up 70% of public investment in his own country. The Presidency aims to ensure that all the preconditions are met for the smooth start of the new cohesion policy for 2014-2020, including agreeing on budgetary amendments needed to approve the delayed remaining operational programmes, he said, adding that it would also pay particular attention to strengthening the role of small- and medium-sized cities, as part of an EU Urban Agenda.

MEPs reiterated their demand for a proper cohesion policy Council formation and asked about the linkage and synergy between cohesion policy and the Commission's Strategic Investment Plan ("Juncker-Plan"), warning that if, with these combined funds, the EU fails to re-launch the economy, it will lose its credibility in the eyes of the electorate. Mr Reirs replied that the "Juncker-Plan" will not become a "second Cohesion Policy" but complement existing programmes, and added that another Presidency priority is to pursue work on macro-regional strategic initiatives.

Legal affairs

Reaching agreements with Parliament on the trade mark package and the small claims procedure proposals will be among Presidency priorities in the justice field Justice Minister Dzintars Rasnačs told the Legal Affairs Committee on Tuesday 20 January. The Presidency also aims to make progress on the proposal to simplify acceptance of certain public documents and on plans to increase number of judges at the General Court of the

European Court of Justice.

MEPs quizzed Mr Rasnačs on the interinstitutional agreement on better regulation, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, ratification of the Marrakesh Treaty on access for visually impaired people to published works, single-member companies, insolvency of natural persons and priorities in the field of family law.

Women's rights and gender equality

The Presidency will take an integrative approach to the issue of equality between women and men, building it into all policy areas, but especially employment, social and health policies, Welfare Minister Uldis Augulis told the Women's Rights and Gender Equality Committee on Monday 19 January.

His priorities include ensuring equal pay for women and men, fighting exclusion and poverty, reconciling work and family life and reducing pension gaps between women and men. The Presidency will urge EU member states to ratify and implement the Istanbul Convention on preventing violence against women. "We will seek compromise in the Council to support the women on company boards directive, so as to get more women into top positions", he added.

Finally, he reiterated the importance of the proposed maternity leave directive, but doubted that the Council would come up with a common agreement on it. Instead, "what we need is new initiative and something more modern", he said.

Culture and education

Culture and creative industries are an engine of economic growth and the Presidency will focus on bridging them to foster their development in Europe, Culture Minister Dace Melbārde told the Culture and Education Committee on Monday 19 January. Answering MEPs' questions, she underlined the importance of technologies in broadening access to digital content and the diversity of broadcasting material. The Presidency will work to build consensus around the proposed "cultural exception" in the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) talks, she added.

The Presidency aims to consolidate the role of education and training in delivering skills that the labour market needs, in line with Agenda 2020, said Education and Science Minister Mārtiņš Seile. It will also seek to strengthen informal education, including social skills that are essential for working life. Replying to MEPs' questions, she added that the Presidency would prepare a coordinated position on the work of the Anti-Doping Agency and looks for ways to move forward with the European Convention on the Manipulation of Sport Competitions.

Foreign affairs

EU enlargement talks will "advance where possible" promised Foreign Affairs Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs, presenting the Presidency's priorities to the Foreign Affairs Committee on Monday 19 January. He hoped to open the first negotiating chapters with Serbia, sign a stabilization and association agreement with Kosovo, open new chapters in talks with Montenegro and achieve progress with Turkey, should it "show commitment to EU values".

MEPs asked whether progress could be expected with Bosnia and Hercegovina. Some worried that Latvia's restrictions on the use of Russian could affect relations with Russia, but also asked what would be done to implement the Ukraine ceasefire. Other questions concerned Latvia's aims for the EU Eastern Partnership summit in Riga in May, fighting terrorism, engaging Muslim societies to counter radicalization and support for peace in Syria and Libya.

This text will be updated twice a day

Press release

Contact

Cornelia GUSA

BXL: (+32) 2 28 32601

STR: (+33) 3 881 73784

EMAIL: cult-press@europarl.europa.eu

TWITTER: EPCulture

Agnese KRIVADE

BXL: (+32) 2 28 43562

STR: (+33) 3 881 73612

PORT: (+32) 498 98 39 83

EMAIL: foreign-press@europarl.europa.eu

TWITTER: EP_ForeignAff