

Dutch Presidency priorities discussed in committee

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The priorities of the incoming Dutch presidency of the EU Council are being outlined to parliamentary committees by Dutch ministers at a series of meetings this week.

Environment

Among the presidency's priorities environment minister Sharon Dijksma cited climate policy : After the December Paris agreement, "we need to work out the details of the agreement and to work energetically to implement them", she told the committee on Thursday. A follow-up roadmap, to be drafted by the European Commission, is to be discussed at the March Environment Council. The Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) reform should be on the agenda for June, "preferably in conjunction with the non-ETS proposals", which she hoped would be finalised by the end of the presidency.

Ms Dijksma also referred to the new "circular economy" package and vowed to "give a headstart to the new proposal on waste, so it can be concluded as soon as possible". Other priorities will be better regulation, with the "Make it work" initiative, sustainable mobility, directives on non-road mobile emissions and national emissions ceilings, and the Euro 5/6 regulation. "The recent emission scandals show that there is room for improvement in EU legislation, both in standards and enforcing compliance", Ms Dijksma said.

Health

"27,000 Europeans die each year due to antibiotic resistance" health, welfare and sports minister Edith Schippers told the committee on Thursday. "By squandering antibiotics, we risk undoing a century of medical progress", she said, adding that the presidency will propose setting up a "One Health" network that will "enable intensive cooperation between the human and veterinary sector, and be a platform for member states to update and assist each other". Another priority will be access to affordable medicines.

On medical devices and official control legislation, which are currently being discussed by the co-legislators, she said that the Dutch Presidency would work to achieve an agreement. Work in the Council will continue on veterinary medicinal products and medicated feed, she added.

Foreign Affairs: Turkish accession, reforms in Ukraine and stability in Syria

Putting Ukraine and Russia at the top of the EU foreign affairs agenda, driving forward the enlargement process and exporting stability, particularly in Syria, were the Dutch presidency's priorities, Bert Koenders, Dutch foreign minister, told the foreign affairs committee on Thursday morning.

Several MEPs raised concerns about the situation in the southeast Kurdish region, with which Mr Koenders concurred. He said a ceasefire was needed there, adding that Turkey remained a key partner for the EU. We need to re-energise the enlargement process while permanently addressing human rights and concerns about press freedom during the negotiations, he said.

Mr. Koenders also promised MEPs to act as an honest broker and to put to the Council a possible Bosnia and Herzegovina EU membership request, which might be filed to the EU

in the coming days.

Many MEPs asked how the Dutch presidency was steering the debate on the Netherlands' ratification of the European Union's association agreement with Ukraine and if there was a plan B in case it was rejected, pointing out that this could have major consequences. Mr Koenders assured the committee that the Dutch government would continue to explain the importance of this agreement to its citizens and how it could contribute to stabilising the EU's eastern borders.

Fisheries: food production, Baltic Sea and Deep Sea

The need to improve food production in order to meet the challenge of feeding the world's growing population and the importance of sustainable fisheries were stressed by Martijn van Dam, Dutch minister for agriculture, in a debate with Parliament's fisheries committee on Thursday. MEPs welcomed this statement.

Mr van Dam said the Dutch presidency was planning to complete the legislative talks on the multiannual plan for the Baltic Sea, set a timetable as soon as possible for continuing the trialogues on the Deep Sea Regulation and also work on the Data Collection Regulation.

Constitutional affairs: inter-institutional agreement, transparency and electoral law reform

The agreement between Parliament, Council and Commission on better law-making, transparency and European electoral law reform were among the Dutch presidency's top priorities, the Dutch foreign minister, Bert Koenders, told the constitutional affairs committee on Thursday.

He said the Council would examine Parliament's suggestions for reforming EU electoral law, which MEPs requested last November, on 29 January. In the debate that followed, some MEPs called on the Dutch presidency to re-launch the negotiations on the EP's right of inquiry.

Agriculture and rural development: CAP reform, organic food and support for farmers

Launching the debate on the post-2020 Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), with the aim of responding better to global climate and food security challenges, increasing the effectiveness of existing greening measures, simplifying current CAP rules and focusing on SMEs, will be at the core of the Dutch presidency, the Netherlands' farm minister, Martijn van Dam, told the agriculture committee on Monday. The presidency would "strive to reach a political agreement" on new organic production rules and on official veterinary and phytosanitary controls and wanted to "make progress on the proposals concerning veterinary medicinal products and medicated feed," he added.

Members of the committee welcomed the presidency's focus on simplification and innovation, while many MEPs urged the presidency to look more closely at major market-related difficulties, such as those in the milk and beef sectors, that farmers are facing today.

Legal affairs: copyright, shareholders' rights and tax transparency

The Dutch presidency was committed to developing a competitive economy and determined to reach an agreement between Parliament and Council on the shareholders' rights directive, the Dutch Minister of Security and Justice, Ard van der Steur, told the legal affairs committee on Monday. He noted Parliament's call for a country-by-country tax reporting requirement, and said he was waiting for an impact assessment, expected from the Commission in the first quarter of 2016.

Replying to MEPs questions on upcoming proposals to modernize copyright rules, Mr van der Steur said discussions would start soon on the new proposal aimed at enhancing the cross-border portability of online content as well as on the draft measures to remove

contract-law-related barriers to cross-border online trade.

Regional development: urban development and cohesion policy

The Dutch agriculture minister, Martijn van Dam, told the regional development committee on Monday that his priorities were the implementation of cohesion policy and an assessment of the achievements to date of the structural funds. He said the Dutch presidency would examine the way forward for cohesion policy and focus on simplifying it. Replying to MEPs' questions, he insisted that it was too early to discuss post-2020 cohesion policy.

In the same debate, Ronald Plasterk, the Dutch minister of the interior and kingdom relations, highlighted the importance of the EU Urban Agenda and the need to have sustainable cities. He said the presidency would focus on the development of partnerships between all relevant stakeholders and work towards the Pact of Amsterdam aimed at creating the EU Urban Agenda.

Civil liberties, justice and home affairs: terrorism, Poland and Schengen

Getting a grip on migration and refugee flows and fighting terrorism and radicalisation were the Dutch presidency's top justice and home affairs priorities, Ard van der Steur, the Dutch justice and security minister, and Klaas Dijkhoff, the migration minister, told the civil liberties committee on Monday. The Dutch presidency would also focus on combatting cybercrime, they said.

Several MEPs were concerned about the situation in Poland and called on the Council to take firm action to guarantee that the rule of law was respected within the EU. Mr Van der Steur said the presidency was following the discussions between the Polish government and the Commission closely and the General Affairs Council planned to discuss the issue in May.

Many MEPs asked whether the Dutch Presidency would advocate a "mini-Schengen" in response to the migration crisis. Mr Dijkhoff said there was no such proposal but warned that if member states could not agree on a mechanism to share asylum seekers controls could be reintroduced. "We will not push it, we want to prevent it," he stressed.

Employment and social affairs: posting of workers, employees' rights and social exclusion

The Dutch deputy prime minister and minister of social affairs and employment, Lodewijk Asscher, pledged to review the posting of workers directive, which should uphold the principles of the common labour market while also protecting workers' rights, as one of the presidency's priorities, in a debate with the employment and social affairs committee on Monday. Mr Asscher was also determined to tackle the issue of "letterbox companies", used to avoid paying taxes and social contributions.

Turning to the social aspects of his portfolio, Mr Asscher said that the fight against poverty shouldn't be "just presenting policy agendas but must be implementing policies". The presidency would encourage member states to share best practice and develop a comprehensive approach to reducing social exclusion, where programmes for housing, social protection and education should go hand in hand.

Industry, research and energy: energy labelling, research investment and energy union

Energy, industrial competitiveness and telecommunications were high on the Dutch presidency's agenda, said Henk Kamp, minister of economic affairs, in a debate with the industry, research and energy committee on Monday. He said the Council Presidency would pay special attention to energy labelling and to the package on security of gas supply and intergovernmental agreements that the Commission was to adopt in February.

In a separate debate, the state secretary for education, culture and science, Sander Dekker, said the Dutch presidency would encourage member states to invest more in

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research and innovation, through a smart regulatory framework, made attractive to researchers with an "open science with open access" approach.

While welcoming this agenda, MEPs highlighted the need for adequate funding for European research and competitiveness-boosting programmes, pointed to the goal of a strong energy union in order to provide affordable energy for all European citizens, and reiterated concerns at the harm done to European industry by dumping and unfair practices.

Further information

- Website of The Netherlands EU Presidency 2016 (NL/FR/DE): <http://english.eu2016.nl/>

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