

EPP Group Report

Issue 12 / December 2011



EU Summit - can confidence in Europe be restored?

By Gunnar Larsson

"Confidence that has gone cannot be restored overnight", Council President Herman Van Rompuy said when meeting MEPs in Strasbourg for a debate on the outcome of the previous week's Summit in Brussels. EU leaders could not reach an agreement on proposed changes to the Treaty, but Van Rompuy sounded a positive note on what had been achieved. Eurozone countries will go ahead building on the Stability and Growth Pact and can be expected to be joined by most other Member States.

EPP Group Chairman Joseph Daul (F) claimed the Council had set the stage for the economic governance of the Eurozone. "The Council showed us that doubts and divisions are now well behind us and that the time has come to exit the crisis. By adopting strict rules for the return to a balanced budget and the reduction of public debt, 26 Member States out of 27 have proven their willingness to return to sound financial policy", he said.

Both Van Rompuy and Daul saw legal challenges facing measures needed to restore confidence and get Europe's economy back in order. Daul talked about solidarity and the Community method. "This situation presents us with a number of not only legal, but political problems", he said. "In the discussions leading to the drafting of new provisions between now and March, my Group wants everything to be done to involve the European Institutions in the negotiations, and in particular that the Parliament plays its rightful role to ensure the democratic legitimacy of the process."

Much more needs to be done apart from getting public finances back in order. "The Union must now tackle the challenge of strengthening and expanding its businesses, its exports and competitiveness, with the same energy and in the same coordinated way", Mr Daul said.

Sakharov Prize goes to the Arab Spring

On Wednesday, the European Parliament awarded five members of the Arab Spring with the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, in recognition and support of their commitment to human rights.

Although primarily it was the EPP Group who proposed the candidates, they were backed by every political group in the House. This showed Parliament's unanimous support in the fight for freedom, democracy and the end of authoritarian regimes.

The event was attended by Egyptian Asmaa Mahfouz, the 26 year old, who, via a video published on Facebook, encouraged young people to demonstrate in the centre of Cairo. The Libyan, Ahmed al-Zubair Ahmed al-Sanusi, was also present. He is considered to be the longest-serving political prisoner, having been incarcerated for more than 30 years, accused of conspiracy against Muammar al Gaddafi's regime.

During the ceremony, Members of the European Parliament paid tribute to those who had lost their lives in the fight for dignity, such as Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi who died after setting himself alight. This act sparked a series of riots and protests against 23 years of rulership by President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali.

The ceremony was marked by the absence of two of the winners: Razan Zaitouneh, the journalist and lawyer who is fighting to defend human rights in Syria, and her compatriot Ali Farzat, the famous satirical-political cartoonist, who criticised Bashar al Asad's regime through his cartoons.

Pedro López de Pablo

Polish Presidency review - Europe needs more of the Community method

By Katarzyna Klaus

In the European Parliament on Wednesday, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk reviewed the past six months of the Polish EU Presidency. In a very difficult atmosphere marked by discussions on the need to deal more decisively with the economic crisis and the expectations of strong action on behalf of Europe's leaders, the Polish Presidency pushed the European agenda forward and achieved significant results.

In the debate on the results of the Polish Presidency, Chairman of the EPP Group Joseph Daul (F) said: "The current crisis is an opportunity for Europeans to be enthusiastic once again, as long as they can learn lessons and can change what has to be changed. The Polish Presidency has helped us to do this and to act together efficiently while respecting everyone's opinions."

"The Polish Presidency had ambitious priorities. Dynamic economy, openness to the neighbours and new EU members, safety in the military and energy dimensions. I think that the choice of these priorities was accurate. However, life brought us difficult conditions for their implementation. Changes have occurred in the southern and northern neighbourhoods. We have had to face financial and economic crises. Nevertheless, the Polish Presidency ends with the message that the answer to internal and external challenges is more of the Community method and more responsibility in Europe", said Jacek Saryusz-Wolski, Head of the Polish Delegation of the EPP Group.

Among the mentioned successes of the Polish Presidency are the adoption of the 'six-pack' agreement, the Single Market Forum and the Cracow Declaration, the Eastern Partnership Summit, progress with the European patent, Croatia's signature of the EU Accession Treaty and the adoption of the first negotiating mandate for the EC to hold talks on the trans-Caspian gas pipeline.

"Poland, like all the Central and Eastern European countries, knows better than anyone the price of freedom and the importance of solidarity. Poland has preferred respect for everyone's opinions and efficiency, without seeking to impose its own views. This is an example which many Member States could follow", concluded Joseph Daul.

Defence: impact of the financial crisis on the defence sector

By Katarzyna Klaus

The Report on the impact of the financial crisis on the defence sector in the EU Member States was adopted by a large majority of MEPs at this week's plenary session. The Member States collectively spend about €200bn a year on defence, but often in a wasteful manner. In light of radical budgetary austerity measures, the Report aims to launch a dialogue with Member States in order to enhance cooperation in the field of defence.

The Vice-Chairman of the Security and Defence Committee Krzysztof Lisek (PL) welcomed the outcome of the plenary vote: "By voting in favour of the Report, MEPs have recognised that we are facing a huge challenge when it comes to cooperation in the area of defence. There is a recent tendency in the majority of EU Member States for radical and uncoordinated cuts in the defence budget. This calls for urgent action". The Report underlines that such measures can have a negative impact on their military capabilities and on the security of EU citizens. Therefore, the MEPs called for enhanced cooperation and recognised the need for pooling and sharing capabilities. "Today, pooling and sharing is a must. We need to identify as quickly as possible the most promising and strategic initiatives in order to reduce our costs", said Krzysztof Lisek.

In 2009, with the entry-into-force of the Lisbon Treaty, EU Member States confirmed their intention to cooperate on defence by enhancing the ESDP under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Given the global challenges that the EU is facing and an increasingly unpredictable security environment, no Member State alone is capable of addressing the threats they face.

"Thinking about our future, we simply cannot afford to neglect basic needs such as security and defence in such turbulent times", concluded Krzysztof Lisek.

European Neighbourhood Policy: Now is the time to act!

By Sandra Carreira

This week, the European Parliament adopted the Report on the Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) by a large majority. The absolute necessity of advocating our fundamental values in relations with Europe's neighbouring countries are the main objectives of this Report. Consolidating security, democratic stability and prosperity of the EU neighbouring countries are the priorities of the ENP Action Plans.

A new strategy with regard to the European Neighbourhood Policy, aimed at empowering citizens, people and their organisations, as well as the regional and local authorities, will be put into practice by the EU, adapted to the socio-economic and political realities of each EU neighbouring country.

Mário David (P), EP Rapporteur of this dossier for the Southern dimension, said: "The EU should pursue a bottom-up approach and a tailor-made Neighbourhood Policy, increasing its support for institution-building, civil society and the will to start democratisation processes, supporting organised movements striving for positive democratic changes in their countries: in advancing women's and children rights - in particular the civic and political participation of women, building and deepening the democratic principles of freedom (of speech, association, media, of choice, etc), fair elections or fighting against corruption, the rule of law, greater social justice, respect for minorities, environmental protection and resource efficiency."

"We also need to promote immediate economic assistance in order to foster socio-economic changes, which are preconditions for long-term stabilisation and prosperity. Helping solve the economic problems of our neighbouring partners in the south will also help solve part of our migration problems", he concluded.

European Transport Policy priorities

By Greet Gysen

During the last plenary session of the year, the European Parliament adopted a Report on the priorities for the EU Transport Policy for the next ten years by Mathieu Grosch (B), EPP Group Coordinator in the Transport and Tourism Committee.

Speaking in plenary, Mr Grosch said: "Transport and mobility are key for the European economy, so it is important we have a sustainable and competitive transport sector."

Safety is one of the main challenges. In Mathieu Grosch's Report, the European Parliament asks for a 50% reduction in the number of deaths and severe injuries by 2020. EU-wide safety and security standards applicable to all carriers have to be introduced.

Another challenge dealt with by the Report is congestion in urban areas. Mr Grosch emphasised the importance of promoting environmentally-friendly public transport so as to double the number of users in the next 10 years.

According to him, an efficient co-modality should be the guiding principle for transport policy: "The chosen mode of transport has to be the most efficient one in terms of the economy, environment and safety instead of systematically shifting freight transport to rail or shipping for distances greater than 300km, as proposed by the Commission."

"To better connect the different regions in Europe, bottlenecks have to be eliminated and cross-border connections improved. European funding has to go to a limited number of projects. Revenues from the internalisation of external costs of all transport modes can strengthen that funding but only if they are reinvested into mobility and the creation of the transport network", he said.

Finally, Mathieu Grosch warned against national protectionism: "Opening up transport markets is of the utmost importance for the Single European Market, but only if this results in better quality services, and training and employment conditions which do not affect safety and security."

EGF: construction sector in Italy and Renault in France to benefit

The European Parliament this week approved the request for the mobilisation of the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund by Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol (Italy) for the building construction sector. The amount provided for this request is equal to approximately €3,918,850 for the support of 528 workers who belong to 323 companies.

The second request for the mobilisation of the EGF which was approved was in the automotive sector to help 3500 Renault workers with €24.49 million.

The EGF, put in place by the EU in 2006, is a concrete response to unemployment resulting from globalisation and, as a temporary measure adopted in 2009, from the economic and social crisis. The financial aid provided by the EGF has an annual ceiling of €500 million and is mainly allocated to job-search assistance, tailor-made retraining, promoting entrepreneurship, aid for self-employment and special temporary 'income supplements' such as: job-search, mobility and training allowances, measures to stimulate disadvantaged or older workers to remain in or return to the labour market, etc. The Fund can pay up to 65% of the total cost, with the remainder paid by the Member State, the region or the local authority.

Barbara Matera (I), Standing Rapporteur for the Parliament on the EGF, said: "Once again, this Parliament has shown the EU's commitment and its closeness to the people because this fund will greatly help workers who are victims of the economic crisis."

Francesco Frapiccini