Note for the attention of the Presidency
Plenary Session of the European Parliament
Strasbourg 4 - 7 February 2013

Item: Council and Commission Statements: Preparation of European Council (7 -8 February)

Debate foreseen: Wednesday 6 February morning

SPEAKING POINTS

President,

Honourable Members,

The European Council which begins tomorrow evening has a heavy agenda. First and foremost it must reach agreement on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). This is essential if the EU is to have the resources and can provide a solid basis on which to plan and deliver the Union’s programmes. But there are other important issues on the agenda such as Trade, the EU's relations with our Southern Mediterranean partners in the context of the Arab Spring, and the situation in Mali.
Let me begin with a few words on the MFF. The European Council will pick up the discussions on the future Multiannual Financial Framework where they were left off last November. We made good progress then, but not enough to reach a deal. We must reach agreement this week, and that will mean everyone having to make compromises.

A failure would risk undermining the stability of the Union, because it would introduce considerable and unnecessary uncertainty with regards to future planning: it would set us back in terms of our capacity to do business at a time when we welcome some returning confidence.

President Van Rompuy has been working since November to see where differences can be bridged and compromises made. He will present the adjustments which he considers necessary to reach a deal. He has the full support of the Irish Presidency.

This takes place of course against the background of unprecedented circumstances. Europe has been experiencing one of its severest ever crises. We cannot escape the fact that we are trying to reach agreement on a future budget when every line of expenditure, both at the European and at national level, is the subject of intense scrutiny. That is the reality facing the European Council.

And it is of course not just the European Council which is concerned. The Presidency, as well as the President of the European Council, is fully aware of the critical importance of the European Parliament in these
negotiations. It is a view which - contrary to what is sometimes claimed - is fully understood by those sitting around the European Council table.

This is not just a matter of good institutional cooperation. There are concerns here in this Parliament which will have to be reflected in any agreement, if there is to be an agreement at all. We know the importance you attach to a number of areas, some of which are factored into the draft currently on the table.

Our understanding of the importance of your views is because we have been listening to you. There were regular close contacts with EP representatives throughout the Cyprus Presidency, and the Irish Presidency has continued that practice only this week in the margins of the General Affairs Council when Tánaiste Eamon Gilmore and I met with the Parliament’s MFF team on Monday ahead of the meeting of the Council. In addition there were contacts on Monday at the highest level when President Schulz, Presidents Van Rompuy and Barroso, and Taoiseach Enda Kenny met, also on Monday morning. No one can claim that we have not been listening.

Even if, as I think we should all want, the European Council reaches an agreement this week, our work does not stop. As Presidency of the Council, we will intensify our work with you to try to ensure, in accordance with the Treaty, that the final legislation on the MFF is something to which the parliament is prepared to give its consent.
And thereafter we will be far from finished, as we will need to continue our cooperation for the timely adoption of the relevant legislative instruments, in line with the procedures enshrined in the Treaty.

President,
Honourable Members

The MFF is probably the most important and urgent issue on this week's agenda, but the European Council will also be addressing several other key topics which I would like to speak on briefly.

Firstly - trade. If the MFF is ultimately about delivering jobs and competitiveness, so is trade. So we must promote free, fair and open trade whilst at the same time asserting our interests. We need to work with global partners, so that in the round we secure mutual advantage. An ambitious trade agenda can open up the prospect of a 2% increase in growth and the creation of over 2 million jobs in the medium term – therein lies the obligation to pursue these opportunities.

While we remain committed to the further development of the multilateral trading system, our immediate focus has to be on developing bilateral trade relations. These can - and must - make a positive contribution to the multilateral system. By building on WTO rules and by promoting openness, the EU’s bilateral agreements will help pave the way for further progress at the multilateral level.
Given the need to prioritise those measures which have the potential to provide the most benefit in terms of jobs, the Union’s trade relationship with the US is towards the top of the Irish Presidency’s agenda. We are eagerly awaiting the final completion of work by the EU-US High Level Group for Jobs and Growth, which is due to issue their recommendation shortly. There are strong expectations that we should aim high and that the level of ambition on both sides should be reflected in a recommendation for a comprehensive trade and investment agreement/FTA. It remains our firm intention to have a negotiating mandate approved by the Council, if possible, during the period of our Presidency.

The European Council will also be assessing the momentous events which have taken place in our Southern neighbourhood over the last two years. They will be looking at how to enhance EU support for the democratic and economic transition processes in the region, and to explore further ways to strengthen the political dialogue with those countries in transition towards democracy. We share so much with our Southern Mediterranean partners. We must use the full range of tools at our disposal to ensure that we work together to establish an area of shared prosperity, based on the adherence to universal values, such as democracy, respect for human rights, rule of law and gender equality.

In order to sustain our commitment to our Mediterranean partners, it is important that the High Representative and the Commission keep relations with our Southern Neighbourhood under review. The Council is expected to be invited to assess the effectiveness of the EU's policies and
instruments in assisting the political and economic transition of the region and to report back by June 2013. During that time, we will, of course, continue to take account of the views of this House.

Finally, the European Council will take stock of developments in Mali, in particular the decisive action taken by Malian and African troops, supported by France, to restore the country's territorial integrity and the authority of the Malian state. With regard to the political process, which is vital to find a long-term solution to the crisis, the adoption of a roadmap for the transition by the Malian National Assembly is a fundamental and encouraging step. It is essential that the roadmap be implemented as quickly as possible.

President
Honourable Members

Any one of these issues would constitute a heavy agenda for the European Council. Together they mean that we begin this year with a meeting which is charged with particularly significant responsibilities, both for the EU internally, its prospects for economic growth and stability, as well as its relationship with the wider world.

I thank you for your attention.