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Speech by Minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport Leo Varadkar to the European Parliament's Transport Committee,

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I should like to thank the Committee for this opportunity to present our priorities in the transport and tourism sector for the Presidency. Firstly, let me congratulate my Cypriot colleague, Efthemios, for the significant progress he and his team made on a variety of important transport files – but particularly in the area of maritime policy which I know is dear to the hearts of many here in the Transport Committee.

I have of course met Brian on numerous occasions in the lead up to the Presidency. I have also met many of you here today in my preparations for the Irish Presidency. These contacts have given me a much deeper appreciation of your priorities and your concerns in relation to the future of the transport and tourism sectors in Europe.

Like any democratic institution, the Parliament represents a broad range of views. The Transport Committee is no exception. What has impressed me in the lead up is your depth of knowledge on transport issues – both at a micro level but also on how decisions taken here will impact on the European citizen. I will certainly try to harness both qualities to make our Presidency a success in the transport field.

Despite differing views and perspectives, I am confident that we all share a number of core objectives – three stand out:

- A) putting Europe back on a stable fiscal and economic footing;
- B) promoting quality employment opportunities, particularly for our young people; and most importantly,
- C) restoring public faith in European Institutions as ones that solve problems and get work done in the interest of Europe's citizens.

Stability, jobs and growth are the core themes for the Irish Presidency. They are the principles we applied in prioritising the vast programme of legislative dossiers. A key focus of the Irish Presidency across all policy formations therefore is to advance legislation that will contribute to creating the conditions for stability, jobs and growth in Europe.

I also know this Committee shares the view that transport is vital in advancing this agenda – both as a driver of Europe’s global competitiveness and a key enabler in realising the full potential of the single market. This is why, for transport, the over-riding priority for our Presidency will be to promote a safer, more integrated, more efficient and sustainable transport network for Europe.

As you know, ours is the last trio of Presidencies during the lifetime of the current Commission and Parliament. To be frank, time is against us. The European legislative process is painstakingly slow.

The implications for us are that any new proposals that come our way from here on in have an ever narrowing window of opportunity for successful conclusion. In this regard we are cooperating closely with our Trio partners, Lithuania and Greece and we will make decisions together in order to be as effective as possible.

Vice President Kallas has assured me that we will see very shortly three significant legislative initiatives - the much anticipated 4th Rail Package – addressing very sensitive issues for many Member States; a proposal on Clean Power for transport – which I expect will set a high bar in terms of infrastructure deployment for renewable energy; and a new Air Passenger Rights proposal which will be no less controversial but with tangible impacts for the citizens of Europe.

There are also a variety of other important proposals which are promised over the course of the next six months – including the EMSA Funding Regulation facilitating the activities of the Agency in relation to maritime pollution; the important Passenger Ship Safety proposal as we mark the first anniversary of the Costa Concordia accident; the next phase in the development of the Blue Belt initiative for short sea shipping – a vital instrument for promoting the competitiveness of the maritime sector; and the next phase in the implementation of the Single European Sky – again a significant priority in driving greater efficiencies and minimizing environmental impacts within Europe’s aviation sector.

The agenda is therefore packed and time is short.

One of the key roles of any Presidency is to make choices and steer the process as efficiently and effectively to achieve our shared aims. My intention is to stay focused on the business end of the Presidency and to act as a facilitator to achieve agreement on some key dossiers in the transport sector. But agreement should not be sought for sake of it. Too often, good proposals are watered down to the lowest common denominator and so many exceptions and opt-outs are provided that we would be better without it.

One of our strengths as a Presidency is that we tend not to bring national agendas to bear at a European level - and this is certainly true for transport.

However, we have a clear interest in making Europe's transport infrastructure more competitive and fit for purpose. As an open trading economy, we are very much dependent on an efficient road and rail network in the UK and continental Europe to ensure our goods get to market at a price that is competitive. Bottlenecks, missing links, airport delays, excessive administrative checks at ports - all add unnecessary cost to our exports.

As you know, Ireland's path to recovery – and also Europe's – will be largely export driven – both within the internal market and outside. In that context, targeted investment addressing bottlenecks and missing links across Europe's transport network is both a national and a European objective. And for that reason, our top priorities in the transport area will be TENT and the CEF.

Ireland, like many other countries, is not in a position to invest in financially transport at the same levels as before. That does not mean we can't invest in transport, it simply means we need to be wiser about how and where we invest. This is very much at the heart of TENT and the CEF where the objective is to target the limited resources available more wisely and where they will add greatest value from a European perspective. The initiative is also about making it attractive for the private sector to play a greater part in delivering key infrastructure investment.

We will advance the Connecting Europe Facility as far as we can over the next six months. Agreement on the Multi-Annual Financial Framework is obviously vital here and we look forward to a good outcome on this during our Presidency. I won't pretend that the CEF budget is secure – we are all aware of

the pressures on the overall budget and that CEF is vulnerable. I will certainly do my utmost to ensure we put the best case forward for the transport element of the CEF and I know my colleague, Minister for Communications and Energy, Pat Rabbitte, will do likewise for the energy and telecoms elements.

A good and early result on TENT will help in this regard – as this sets out the vision or framework for the investment. TENT is the business plan for the CEF. I know the Rapporteurs on the TENT - Georgios Koumoutsakos and Ismail Ertug - stand ready to work with Council on your behalf to secure a good outcome on this file. Equally, Council stands ready to do a deal on a TENT regulation which underpins the case for future cross-border investment in Europe's transport network. I do not for a minute underestimate the task ahead of us in securing agreement but you can be sure that we will make every effort to bridge the gaps on the core issues in TENT. TENT has a 40 year perspective – so it is vital that we get this right.

The Airports Package is another priority for us. It seeks to address a number of impediments to enhancing the competitiveness and efficiency of Europe's aviation sector. As you know, Council has expressed its view on the three elements of the package – noise, slots and ground handling. We now await the Parliament's verdict on the ground handling element of this package which I recognise presents particular difficulties. I understand that this issue is high on your agenda and will be discussed this afternoon. I hope that the EP will be in a position to find a way forward which will enable us to bring the package to conclusion.

Once there is clarity on the ground handling report, we will work intensively with Giommaria Uggias, Artur Zasada and Jorg Leichtfried on these files to secure the optimum result for all the stakeholders in this.

Ireland is an island nation with a strong maritime tradition and a keen advocate of the ILO's Maritime Labour Convention which provides rights and protection at work for seafarers. I am very keen to see progress in implementing the Maritime Labour Convention through the proposals for Port and Flag State regulations. Adequate working conditions for seafarers are a prerequisite for the safe operation of shipping. The MLC enters into force in August this year. It is essential that Europe is ready for this. However, I would also ask MEPs to note that the ratification process is long and complex. Ratification involves revision of a century's worth of maritime legislation and I know that Member States are all working very hard to meet the timetable.

Brian, I know, is keen to do business with us on the Port State and we will be working with the Employment Committee to secure agreement on the Flag State element.

Another file on which we expect to achieve a good result with your cooperation is the Tachograph regulation. I met with Silvia-Adriana TICAU in December and I believe that a deal is within reach with a measure of good will from all sides. This file provides for a technological update of the Tachograph which will improve the security of the Tachograph system and allow for real improvements for the safety and competitiveness of EU road transport.

These are the files we are hopeful of negotiating with you as equal partners in this legislative process. Today is not occasion for an in-depth discussion on finer points or identifying the red lines for either institution. There is a process in place to navigate the negotiations to a successful conclusion and we will spare no effort to achieve that.

I briefly mentioned the raft of new legislative proposals we are anticipating from the Commission over the coming months. We do not expect to bring these to European Parliament by way of trialogues given the time constraints we face. Having said that, I know there are a number of proposals which the Transport Committee will be very keen to commence your own deliberations on.

First among these is the Fourth Rail Package. This package has been identified as a key priority in the Single Market Act 2 and will certainly feature high on our Council agenda. We hope there will be no more delays with the Commission proposals here. The package will deal with critical technical issues to enhance safety and interoperability, and also more politically sensitive issues such as market access and public service obligations. Our plan is to make progress on the technical aspects of this file as these will form the basis for overcoming obstacles to achieving a fully-integrated rail system in Europe.

There is clearly a great deal of interest in this file and it will need to be handled with care. I am very conscious that agreement on the last Rail Recast was hard won and many involved are still a little battle weary. The sector is undergoing a great deal of re-structuring and reform across Europe – Ireland's rail sector, though small, is no exception to this. We need to move carefully and for that reason, we will work on building consensus on those elements of the Package where the objectives across the EU are most closely aligned. Safety and

interoperability are the building blocks on which will focus our initial efforts. I hope to see many of you at an event hosted by the Community of European Railways this evening in the Renaissance hotel where I will participate in a discussion on the issues affecting peripheral and regional rail networks.

Air Passenger Rights is also a much anticipated dossier which I will happily progress in Council once the Commission finalise their internal deliberations on it. We expect these proposals to clarify issues such as the rights of passengers, particularly in cases of flight cancellations, delays and denied boarding. In the context of the European Year of the Citizen, this proposal has a particularly strong resonance and we would hope to take this to our June Transport Council in good shape with a view to passing it to our Lithuanian colleagues to open discussions with you.

A third proposal with potentially far-reaching benefits beyond transport is the proposed Clean Power for Transport initiative – which I understand the Commission will publish shortly. From my contacts with Vice President Kallas, it seems this proposal will push for greater deployment of charging and fuelling infrastructure from renewable energy sources.

There will be a particular focus on charging infrastructure for electric vehicles – an area in which Ireland has pressed ahead over recent years. This file has implications for transport, energy and environment policies and I will be keen to build consensus among my colleague Ministers in these sectors at Council. This is an area where Europe can take a lead. My hope here is to open the debate at Transport Council in June.

Two other important proposals in the maritime sector are also likely to feature during our Presidency - Passenger Ship Safety and legislation to advance the Blue Belt initiative aimed at reducing the administrative burdens for short sea shipping within the EU.

The TRAN committee is the lead committee for Integrated Maritime Policy (IMP) which falls under the General Affairs Council and is therefore managed by the Irish Foreign Affairs Ministry. Harnessing the potential of the EU's 89,000km of coastline is something which the Irish Presidency will attach particular importance to.

Of the broad range of IMP issues likely to be live during the Irish Presidency the most important will be a legislative proposal on Maritime Spatial Planning and Coastal Zone Management, which is expected to be presented to the Council

and EP in February. We hope to get a Council position on this which will allow the Lithuanian presidency to open inter-institutional negotiations. As I understand it, it has not been decided whether TRAN or ENVI will take the lead on this file.

Another key IMP dossier will be the launch of an Action Plan for the Atlantic Strategy, working with the Commission, EP and other Atlantic Member States (France, Spain, Portugal and UK).

There are also a number of technical but important files on the table which I hope to bring to Council for General Approach including a new Marine Equipment Directive - which harmonises standards for equipment on board ships. There are two other files being worked on by the IMCO and ENVI committees: the Recreational Craft Directive and the Sound level of motor vehicles for which we hope to reach agreement with Parliament.

You have begun work on the Road Worthiness Package on which I note you have a public hearing scheduled for tomorrow. The package aims to strengthen the framework for a set of minimum standards for periodic vehicle testing and roadside checks. During the Cyprus Presidency, Council reached a position on the Periodic Testing element of the proposals. Here the Council was concerned to focus on minimum standards to improve safety while also minimising administrative and cost burdens. During the next six months we hope to reach a Council position on the other two files, paving the way for Lithuania to open negotiations with Mr Kuhn, Ms Sehnalová and Ms Savisaar-Toomast.

Ireland has a very strong track record on road safety which I am keen to maintain and improve upon. We do not have a monopoly on wisdom in this area and in that context, I plan to host a major conference on road safety in Dublin during our Presidency in order to facilitate an exchange of good practice in relation to this critical issue for European citizens. The focus of the conference will be on serious injuries and will take place on 28th March in Dublin Castle. The Vice President will address the conference against a backdrop of some new European initiatives in the area of injury prevention. I would also be delighted to see members of the Committee at this conference.

Ireland will also host the Ninth ITS European Congress in the Convention Centre in Dublin from 4th to 7th June – where the focus will be on optimizing the benefits of Intelligent Transport Systems across the EU. My colleague,

Minister of State Alan Kelly and an ex-colleague of yours in the Parliament, is leading our involvement in this conference.

A final word on Tourism which I know is an important element of your remit.

Tourism is a sector which is an important part of the European economy, supporting employment and economic activity right across the Union – often in places or for people with limited access to other economic opportunities. The Irish Presidency is supportive of measures to enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of tourism at EU level, to support jobs and growth. Similarly, tourism was identified as having a key role in Ireland’s economic recovery – with measures to support it across Government, from taxation and social contributions to transport and visas, as well as within the tourism sector as such.

Numerous EU policies influence the Tourism Sector and we will continue to monitor all such developments closely in the months ahead. I want to briefly mention the COSME programme which, as you know, recognises the importance of the tourism sector as an engine for growth and job creation. My colleague the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation Richard Bruton will lead on this dossier once there is clarity on the budget parameters.

Finally I should mention the Parliament’s own Tourism Task Force led by Carlos Fidanza. I know that the group is working on a list of priority actions in the tourism field – and I am glad to see my party colleague, Jim Higgins is a key member of this Task Force. Jim will contribute enormously to the work of this Task Force – bringing not only his expertise and experience to bear but his passion for promoting tourism particularly along Ireland’s west coast. I look forward to seeing the outcome of Task Force’s deliberations.

Cultural and heritage tourism has been a focus of various European policy initiatives. Fáilte Ireland – our National Tourism Development Authority - will host a major international conference as part of the Presidency on 25th April in Dublin Castle. The focus will be on Heritage Tourism and the lessons from various international perspectives on channelling heritage to enhance the tourism experience. I would like to take the opportunity to invite Members of the Task Force to participate at this conference.

It would be remiss of me, finally, not to mention another important initiative taking place in 2013. The Gathering Ireland is a year-long celebration of

Ireland, Irish people, heritage, food, language and culture. We are inviting everyone with Irish heritage and anyone else who has a special affinity for Ireland to make a special effort to visit Ireland in 2013. We will be offering special package to everyone attending a Presidency event in Ireland to return in the second half of the year.

This has been a whistle-stop tour of our Presidency programme – which I'm sure you will acknowledge is ambitious by any measure. Success on some of our key objectives will depend on your continued cooperation. Time is short so let's get down to business.