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THE ITALIAN PRESIDENCY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

PAST AND FUTURE ACTIVITIES

The programme of the Italian Presidency, which was finalised between the government and the Commission on 8th January and illustrated to the European Parliament on 17th January, has received unanimous support in terms of the objectives set under the six-month Presidency.

At the meetings in December and January with the Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers of the member countries, the Presidency verified that its focus on relations between the institutions of the Union and its citizens and on issues relating to employment, and freedom and security were viewed positively by all the political representatives of Europe, who recognise that a problem exists regarding the public perception of the benefits of European integration.

PROGRESS TO DATE

In the brief two months period, a number of important achievements have already been recorded by the Italian Presidency.

a) Former Yugoslavia: The Rome Conference on the implementation of the Dayton Agreements (17-18th February) made it possible to adopt a series of texts on the situation in Mostar and Sarajevo, the consolidation of the Croat-Muslim Federation, the normalisation of relations between Croatia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the International Criminal Court, refugees and human rights. It also reiterated Europe's wholehearted support for the European High Representative, Bildt, particularly with regard to the implementation of confidence-building measures between the Bosnian Serbs and Croats/Muslims, and especially in the area of Sarajevo. The conclusions adopted by the General Affairs Councils held in January and February broadly accepted the proposals of the Presidency to take a global and regional approach to manage the post-war phase in the Balkans, with particular emphasis on economic reconstruction aspects. It is in this framework that the agreement in principle on extending the PHARE Programme to Bosnia Herzegovina has to be viewed.

b) The adoption of the TACIS Regulation relating to the provision of assistance to the newly independent States of the former USSR and to Mongolia, which will enable the Union to pursue its efforts to revive their economies. The amendments to the previous Regulation, which expired on 31st December 1995, will bring considerable benefits to the recipient countries and to community business, thanks

to our action, in terms of the quality, transparency and effectiveness of the technical assistance provided.

c) The thorough preparation of the Europe/Asia Summit in Bangkok (1st-2nd March): This was carried out by the Presidency and the Thai authorities, making it possible for the European Union to achieve great success and unprecedented visibility in the Asian continent. The final declaration of the Summit - to whose drafting the Italian Presidency made a decisive contribution - forms the basis for future developments in Euro-Asian dialogue. The credibility of the Union was also enhanced by the agreement which the Presidency managed to obtain at the February GAC to grant five million ECUs to KEDO (Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation) as part of a major international effort in the field of nuclear security and non-proliferation.

d) Euro/Mediterranean Relations: This is one of the priorities of the Italian Presidency which is committed to acting, in close coordination with the Commission, to ensure concrete and operational follow-up to the Barcelona Conference.

The Presidency has laid down a number of important initiatives relating to various areas for improved cooperation between the Union and Mediterranean third countries, fleshing out the notion of partnership that was elaborated at Barcelona: the ministerial level Conference

on the Information Society (Rome, 30th-31st May), the Conference on the Protection and Rediscovery of our Common Cultural Heritage (Bologna, 21st-23rd April) and the Energy Conference (Trieste, first week of June) as well as the Tourism Seminar (Naples, 9-11th May). Technical meetings with representatives of 27 Euro-Mediterranean countries will also be organised in Italy and in Brussels to deal with vocational training, the development of micro-enterprises, environmental protection and physical planning and spatial development.

e) The Middle East Peace Process: The Italian Presidency is successfully helping the European Union to become once again an active and credible party in the search for a solution to the Middle East crisis. In addition to guaranteeing the Union's visible and concrete presence during the Palestinian elections (the Troika Mission of 21st January), the Presidency has established close political contacts in the area and has won the agreement of the partners to involve the Union in the post-election process, particularly with regard to the essential issue of setting up stable democratic institutions. The visit by the Troika to the Autonomous Territories, Israel and Damascus was a key moment in this strategy. In her capacity as President, Minister Agnelli visited Tel Aviv and Gaza for discussions with Perez, Barak and Arafat on 5th March, to express solidarity with Israel in the wake

of the carnage, and above all to reiterate Europe's determined support for continuing the peace process.

f) Plan of Action for Russia: The Italian Presidency has ensured compliance with a very tight schedule for the rapid adoption of the Plan to lay down guidelines for strategic relations between the European Union and Russia, maintaining constant dialogue with Moscow (on 19th February Minister Agnelli visited Moscow), despite the present internal difficulties the country is currently facing. In order to avoid a dangerous sidelining of Moscow on the international stage, the Italian Presidency has successfully worked for the admission of Russia to the Council of Europe.

g) The Italian Presidency obtained the unanimous and immediate endorsement of its partners for the appointment of Aldo Ajello as the special envoy of the European Union to the "Great Lakes" region. In coordination with the OAU and the UN, Ajello will oversee the preparations for a Conference on peace, security and stability in the region.

h) The Trans-Atlantic Agenda: Through direct contacts with Washington, the Italian Presidency immediately set about implementing the Agenda, successfully establishing constant consultation with the Americans in the present main crisis areas (former Yugoslavia and the Middle East).

i) The Cyprus Question: The Presidency has appointed Ambassador Di Roberto as its own representative to help bring about a solution to the Cyprus crisis.

j) The positive outcome of the conciliation procedure with the European Parliament for the approval of the Kaleidoscope Programme, which supports artistic creativity within the European Union, is proof of the excellent inter-institution relations that exist between the Presidency and the European Parliament. Kaleidoscope is the first major cultural programme adopted since the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty. Procedures of reconciliation with regard to three health care programmes (drugs, AIDS, and cancer) and the directive governing clearing operations between banks, were also concluded in the same spirit.

THE FUTURE

The Presidency has so far kept to the Programme of Work as originally laid down, in terms of its objectives, timetable and organisation. The main future commitments may be summarised as follows:

a) The convening of the Intergovernmental Conference (29-30th March) on the basis of an ambitious mandate, and the commencement of negotiations to revise the Treaty so that an interim report can be delivered to the Irish Presidency to be used as basis for the follow-up: these

are the main commitments of the Italian Presidency which has been preparing the Turin European Council and working on the procedures for the ICG since January this year.

b) External Relations: It is important to ensure that the MEDA Regulation is rapidly adopted. After January 1st 1997 this will form the basis for the provision of financial aid by the Union to Mediterranean third countries. The adoption of the complementary mandate to negotiate with South Africa (to establish a free trade area with it) is an extremely important political act which the Union cannot evade. The success of the Donors' Conference to be held next April on the reconstruction of the former Yugoslavia is an objective of vital importance to the EU, which will ensure that the other international partners will take upon themselves commitments comparable to those of the European Union. Still on the subject of former Yugoslavia, the Presidency intends to carefully prepare the Mid-term review Conference on the implementation of the Dayton Agreements to be convened in June in Italy.

Other commitments relate to negotiations with Mexico and the preparation for the ministerial meetings with the San José and Rio Group countries, and the conclusion of telecommunications agreements within the framework of the World Trade Organisation.

c) One of the priority concerns of the Presidency is to deal concretely the question of fighting unemployment. The "employment confidence pact" announced by the Commission takes on board the policy indications provided by the Presidency and involves intense concerted action to ensure that the common approach will lead to decisions being adopted by the Council. The central core of this strategy is dialogue with the Social Parties: the Round Table organised by the Commission in Brussels at the end of April should provide initial input for the debate looking ahead to the joint meeting of ECOFIN and Social Affairs ministers in Luxembourg on 3rd June. The Tripartite Conference, which will be held in mid-June in Italy, will be of vital importance for ensuring the broadest possible convergence between the governments and the Social Parties on guidelines and measures to be adopted with regard to labour costs, flexibility and organisation, vocational training and job-creating mechanisms.

Great importance is therefore attached to the positive conclusion of two conciliation procedures with the European Parliament with regard to trans-European Networks in the fields of energy and transport, the policy decision to increase Union allocations already earmarked for the Networks, the supplementary funding for the Research Framework Programme, and the launching of the four-year programme for SMEs.

d) Complementary objectives are the approval of the Directive on the internal electricity market and the Directive on detached workers and parental leave.

e) In accordance with the conclusions of the Madrid European Council it is the responsibility of the Italian Presidency to continue preparing for the move-over to the single currency through the regular monitoring by the ECOFIN Council of the member countries' economic policies. The Presidency will also begin examining future relations between the countries which will adopt the single currency on the scheduled date of 1st January 1999 and those which will not initially take part in the final phase of Economic and Monetary Union. The Presidency intends to organise a first thorough debate on the subject at the ECOFIN Informal Council in April.

f) Solving the problem of the competence of the Court of Justice in the framework of the Europol Convention, and defining a policy approach to the package of three directives presented by Commissioner Monti on the free movement of persons and the abolition of intra-Community border controls are two very important objectives in the area of freedoms and security of Europe's citizens.