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OUTCOME OF THE COUNCIL MEETING

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Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs

Employment and Social policy issues

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TRADE POLICY

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- Where declarations, conclusions or resolutions have been formally adopted by the Council, this is indicated in the heading for the item concerned and the text is placed between quotation marks.
- Documents for which references are given in the text are available on the Council's internet site (<http://www.consilium.europa.eu>).
- Acts adopted with statements for the Council minutes which may be released to the public are indicated by an asterisk; these statements are available on the Council's internet site or may be obtained from the Press Office.

ITEMS DEBATED

European Semester 2017

The Council held a policy debate ([6265/17](#)) on the **European Semester 2017**. Focusing on the implementation of the country-specific recommendations, it discussed how to enhance labour market access and reduce divergence across the EU.

Ministers highlighted that the employment and social situation in the EU is slowly improving.

Towards the end of 2016, the EU registered the lowest unemployment rates since 2009. Similarly, the youth and long-term unemployment rates are decreasing.

At the same time, these positive trends are not uniform throughout the Union. In certain regions, unemployment levels continue to be high. Furthermore, the number of people at risk of poverty is still concerning, despite recent signs of improvement.

In recent years, the EU has faced a multitude of challenges which have not affected all member states in the same way. The member states have strived to implement policies to address structural weaknesses.

In this context, the implementation of the country-specific recommendations is of paramount importance. The EU has slowly been making progress. It is important to continue and multiply these efforts so as to achieve economically sustainable and socially inclusive growth throughout the Union.

The Council adopted conclusions on the 2017 annual growth survey ([6885/17](#)) and the joint employment report, both of which address priorities for action in the areas of employment and social policies.

It adopted the joint employment report ([6887/17](#)), which provides an annual overview of key employment and social developments in Europe and of member states' reform actions.

The Commission presented to the Council an overview of the 2017 country reports ([6318/17](#)).

Coordination of social security systems

The Council held an orientation debate on an amended regulation on the coordination of social security systems, on the basis of a presidency note ([6269/17](#)).

The debate was intended to provide political orientation from the outset since the work in the relevant Council working party has recently started.

The presidency summarized the debate as confirming that the revision of the directive is important and necessary. There is the will, interest and spirit of mutual cooperation amongst ministers for achieving progress on this dossier.

Ministers highlighted the importance of proper codification of case law, greater simplification and clarity of rules, legal certainty and transparency.

It also emerged from the debate that there was a lack of agreement on a series of elements and issues, including the extension of unemployment benefits. Indexation is a particularly contentious issue and currently gives rise to diverging and contrasting views.

It is clear that there are various elements related to equal treatment and posting of workers that need further clarification.

The Maltese presidency reaffirmed its commitment towards the negotiations on this proposal. More work needs to be done and compromises need to be reached on the path ahead.

The new regulation

The new proposal ([15642/16](#)), presented in December 2016, is intended to update and modernize provisions on the coordination of European social security systems. It will increase legal clarity, establish fair and equitable burden-sharing and improve enforcement through simpler administrative rules.

In particular, the proposal focuses on access to social benefits in four areas:

- unemployment benefits,
- long-term care benefits,
- economically inactive mobile citizens, and
- family benefits.

The Commission also proposes strengthening the administrative rules on social security coordination for posted workers and giving member states' authorities better tools to address any unfair practices or abuse.

Tripartite Social Summit (TSS)

The EPSCO Council was informed of the preparations for the TSS to be held on 8 March. The main theme of the summit is "The future of Europe: charting the course towards growth, employment and fairness". The three sub-themes cover the following issues (i) making work pay as a way to promote employment and social inclusion; (ii) new forms of work and the future of industry; and (iii) the European pillar of social rights and the role of the social partners.

Enhancing the skills of women and men

The Council adopted conclusions ([6889/17](#)) on enhancing the skills of women and men in the EU labour market. The conclusions highlight the importance of enhancing skills as a means of supporting women's and men's participation in the labour market.

The conclusions are based on a research note ([6268/17 ADD1](#)) from the European Institute for Gender Equality.

Any other business

- The Commission informed the Council about its communication "Safer and healthier work for all - Modernisation of the EU occupational safety and health legislation and policy".
- The presidency informed the Council about the state of play of discussions on the posting of workers in the framework of the provision of services.
- The Commission informed the Council about the follow-up to its communication on investing in Europe's youth.
- The respective Chairs informed the Council about the work programmes of the Employment Committee and the Social Protection Committee for 2017.
- The Portuguese delegation informed the Council about the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) international conference "A sustainable society for all ages: Realising the potential of living longer". The conference is to take place in Lisbon on 21-22 September 2017.
- A representative from the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) informed the Council about the key findings of the EIGE study on "Economic benefits of gender equality in the EU".

OTHER ITEMS APPROVED**FISHERIES****EU and Ghana - Negotiations for a fisheries partnership agreement**

The Council adopted a decision to authorise the Commission to open negotiations on behalf of the EU on a sustainable fisheries partnership agreement (FPA) and a protocol with the Republic of Ghana.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS**Relations with Kazakhstan**

The Council adopted the working arrangements of the Cooperation Council, the Cooperation Committee, specialised subcommittees or any other bodies established in the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and the Republic of Kazakhstan. On 26 October 2015 the Council adopted a decision to enhance the partnership and cooperation between the EU and Kazakhstan. The EU and Kazakhstan agreed to strengthen their cooperation on all subjects of common interest and to work towards improving the conditions for further regional cooperation in Central Asia and beyond.

EU Special Representative for the Middle East Peace Process

The Council extended the mandate of Fernando Gentilini as the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for the Middle East Peace Process until 30 June 2018. The EUSR's mandate is to facilitate and maintain close contacts with all the parties to the peace process and provide an active and efficient EU contribution to actions and initiatives leading to a final settlement of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict based on a two-state solution. The Council allocated a budget of EUR 1.825 million for the period from 1 March 2017 to 30 June 2018 to cover the expenditure related to the EUSR's mandate.

Misappropriation of Ukrainian state funds

The Council extended until 6 March 2018 the asset freezes imposed on 15 people identified as responsible for the misappropriation of Ukrainian state funds or for abuse of office causing a loss to Ukrainian public funds, following the annual review of the restrictive measures. One person was removed from the list. The measures had initially been introduced in March 2014 and were extended in March 2015 and in March 2016. The legal acts were published in the Official Journal on 4 March 2017.

TRADE POLICY**Agreement on trade in civil aircraft**

The Council approved the conclusion, on behalf of the EU, of a 2015 protocol amending the annex to a WTO agreement on trade in civil aircraft ([6604/17](#) + [11018/16](#) + [11019/16](#)).

The amendments relate to product coverage. They follow changes introduced in 2007 to a harmonised commodity description and coding system used for implementing the agreement.

The European Parliament gave its consent to the conclusion of the agreement on 17 February 2017.
