

15.10.2019

Mr Donald Tusk
President of the European Council

Dear Donald!

Dear Mr Tusk,

In June, we adopted a forward-looking Strategic Agenda for the EU for the next five years. The Finnish Presidency has been the first to integrate its priorities into the Council work. I will report on the progress made at our next European Council. To keep our follow-up discussion to the point, I would like to share with you – in more detail – what has been done in different sectors during the first few months of our Presidency of the Council of the EU.

We have worked to ensure that the priorities of the Strategic Agenda are addressed in different Council configurations across the policy spectrum and have held formal and informal debates on the future of various policies.

Protecting citizens and freedoms

The Strategic Agenda makes clear that our common values are the foundation of European freedom, security and prosperity. The rule of law is a key guarantor that these values are well protected and must be fully respected by all Member States and the EU. The General Affairs Council discussed the question of enhancing respect for the rule of law in the Union, developing the EU's rule of law instruments and strengthening their synergies in July and September. To this end, the Finnish Presidency launched the evaluation of the Council's rule of law dialogue. In July, the JHA Ministers also considered ways to strengthen the rule of law in their field.

Furthermore, the Finnish Presidency organised informal debates on the future of the EU's internal security and the way forward for EU migration and asylum policy in July. Discussions on migration continued over the JHA ministers' lunch in October. The aim is to conclude discussions at the JHA Council in December.

On migration, JHA discussions were held on how to deal with migrants rescued in the Mediterranean as a result of search-and-rescue operations, as well as their disembarkation and relocation. Attention was also drawn to the situation on the other routes. Whilst there have been numerous calls for progress to be made on the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), this can only really be expected once the new Commission comes forward with fresh ideas on how to unblock the file.

According to the Strategic Agenda, we must protect our societies from malicious cyber activities, hybrid threats and disinformation, and do so in a coordinated manner. In line with this objective, a new Horizontal Working Party on Enhancing Resilience and Countering Hybrid Threats was established in early July.

Scenario-based policy discussions on hybrid threats were conducted at the informal JHA Council in July. The foreign and defence ministers also jointly addressed the topic in August. On both occasions, the Member States highlighted the need for an EU-level response and for mutual assistance in the event of a hybrid threat (making reference to the solidarity clause or the mutual assistance clause under the Treaties). In addition, the ministers of finance reflected upon the resilience of financial markets and the role of the financial sector in countering hybrid threats in September. The key take-aways from the discussions and further steps towards a comprehensive approach to security will be discussed with a view to developing Council Conclusions later on this year.

Developing our economic base: the European model for the future

The priority of developing our economic base has mainly been discussed by the Competitiveness Council. The ministers exchanged views on a long-term vision for sustainable growth that takes forward the March and June European Council guidance on a more integrated approach connecting all relevant policies and dimensions. The ministers stressed the need to assess and remove existing

barriers in the single market and to create a better business environment where vigorous competition policy should remain a key factor.

The Presidency's work builds on the idea that the EU needs a comprehensive, ambitious and forward-looking growth agenda with effective and well-targeted policy measures to improve its productivity and competitiveness on the global market. At the same time, environmentally and socially sustainable economic growth must be guaranteed.

The Member States identified the main elements of a well-functioning single market, forward-looking industrial policy, research and innovation, digitalisation, skills and external dimension. Against this holistic background, the competitiveness ministers will take the work further, especially in the field of single market and industrial policy.

The Competitiveness Council also discussed the role of research and innovation for our sustainable growth agenda. The ministers agreed on the need to promote innovative solutions, to use 'missions' as strategic tools, to simplify the Horizon Europe package and to improve its synergies with other programmes.

Our aim is a cross-cutting approach to the digital economy. To that end, different Council configurations will focus, for example, on a human-centred data economy, the education and training-related aspects of artificial intelligence, the cybersecurity of 5G networks and the legal aspects of artificial intelligence.

As regards the completion of the Economic and Monetary Union, at the informal meeting in September, the finance ministers and central bank governors expressed a shared desire to develop a roadmap for the next stages of the capital markets union (CMU). The Presidency hopes that the follow-up work will culminate in Council conclusions on rebooting the CMU by the end of this year. The Finnish Presidency has also taken forward discussions on the euro area budget.

Building a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe

Regarding the horizontal priority of building a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe, tackling climate change has been the focus of our attention. The Finnish Presidency has put the issue on the agenda of almost all Council configurations: the Agriculture and Fisheries, Transport, Energy, Competitiveness, Environment and Employment Councils, and informal meetings of ministers of finance, defence and agriculture, as well as ministers responsible for competitiveness and ministers for the environment.

Debates have covered a wide range of issues, such as ways to inject higher environmental ambition into the post-2020 CAP, the role of farmers in climate action and best practices on soil carbon sequestration and emission reduction in land transport, aviation and shipping. Furthermore, the achievement of the EU's common 2030 energy targets, decarbonisation of the energy sector beyond 2030, energy taxes as an instrument of climate policy and the central role of policy measures relevant for or at the disposal of the finance ministers (such as carbon pricing, emission trading, sustainable budgeting and investments) were touched upon. The exchange of views covered also the employment aspects of a climate-neutral economy and ways in which the EU could be both competitive and climate-neutral and how research and innovation could help us achieve our climate targets. In addition, the ministers discussed how the armed forces could reduce their ecological footprint and adapt to new climate-related threats.

A stocktaking debate on the work regarding the EU's long-term strategy was held at the October Environment Council. The ministers for the environment also adopted conclusions on the circular economy, which is an important driver for cutting greenhouse gases, respecting planetary boundaries and reaching the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

In the ECOFIN sector, the Council has reached a general approach on the taxonomy package as regards sustainable finance.

When we discussed the EU's strategic long-term vision for a climate neutral economy at the June European Council, many agreed with the objective of climate neutrality by 2050. However, a few were still considering ways to achieve this and requested more work on the conditions, incentives

and enabling framework. The Finnish Presidency will work hard to reach agreement on the EU 2050 vision at the European Council in December.

As regards a fair and social Europe, at the July EPSCO Council the social affairs ministers discussed the Economy of Wellbeing as an important new approach reconciling growth and wellbeing policies, with close connections to the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals. The EPSCO Council will adopt conclusions on the Economy of Wellbeing in October.

Promoting Europe's interests and values in the world

While the Foreign Affairs Council chaired by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy has been taking care of implementation of the priority of promoting Europe's interests and values in the world, the Finnish Presidency has played its part. It has contributed to the consistency across the Union's internal and external policies, which is of great importance for the strengthening of the EU's global role in line with the Strategic Agenda.

In addition, the Presidency convened the trade ministers for an informal lunch meeting in October. The discussion covered the EU's ongoing efforts to strengthen the multilateral trading system and to preserve the WTO's dispute settlement system, the implementation of free trade agreements, EU-US trade relations and the next steps in the EU-Mercosur agreement. The work necessary to take forward the trade-related aspects of the Strategic Agenda will continue at the November Council. These aspects are not only an important part of promoting the EU's interests and values in the world but also contribute to sustainable growth.

Delivering on our priorities

According to the Strategic Agenda, each institution should revisit its working methods and reflect on the best way to fulfil its role under the Treaties. For this purpose, the Finnish Presidency launched a process to review the working methods of the Council. Discussions have been taken forward on a number of themes related to Council configurations, legislative procedure, interinstitutional relations, the role of Coreper and external relations and economic and financial affairs. Two additional themes are yet to be examined, namely the Council security environment and interaction

between the European Council and the Council. At the end of the process, the Presidency will present a summary report with recommendations for concrete measures to be taken. The Finnish Presidency has also worked to find pragmatic ways to make the Council's work more open and understandable to citizens.

The Finnish Presidency is committed to engaging with the other EU institutions to ensure that the priorities of the Strategic Agenda are reflected in the upcoming work of the EU as a whole. It is important that the European Council ensures active follow-up of the Strategic Agenda and gives further political direction, as necessary. Good interaction between the European Council and the Council is essential. The Council, the Commission and the European Parliament need to work closely together to implement our ambitious priorities. I look forward to our discussion with the President-elect of the new Commission at the European Council.

The Finnish Presidency will also continue the efforts to ensure that the objectives of the Strategic Agenda are addressed across the Council. I will revert to this issue in December.

Yours sincerely,



Antti Rinne

Prime Minister