

ESBA Presidency Bulletin of 30 January 2008 – Slovenian Presidency



INTRODUCTION

On 1 January 2008, the Republic of Slovenia took over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union for a term of six months. Slovenia, one of the smaller EU countries with only 2 million citizens, will during the first half of 2008 be the first of the new wave of Member States, which joined the EU in 2004, to preside over the 27-nation bloc.

In its Presidency Programme, the Slovenian Government has set ambitious targets in order to prepare the EU for the challenges of the 21st Century. To a large extent, the priorities of the Slovenian Presidency are specified in the joint 18-month Programme of the German, Portuguese and Slovenian Presidencies. This document sets out the EU priorities that are coordinated with the next Troika: France, Czech Republic and Sweden.

During its presidential term, Slovenia will however stress in particular highly political topics such as: implementation of the Lisbon Treaty by 2009, the launch of the new Lisbon Strategy Cycle, a new integrated Energy and Climate Change Policy, strengthening the European perspective on Western Balkans, and the promotion of the dialogue between cultures, beliefs and traditions in the context of the 2008 European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

The following sections will examine policy areas, which are of particular relevance to SMEs.

SME FOCUS

The new Lisbon Cycle

The Slovenian Presidency attaches great importance to the improvement of the competitiveness of the European economy. During its term, Slovenia will therefore pay special attention to the realisation of the Lisbon objectives for growth and employment by ensuring an effective preparation of and transition into the next Lisbon cycle (2008-11).

The overall aim of the Lisbon Agenda, established in 2000, is to turn the EU into the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. In order to reach this ambitious target, the Lisbon Strategy was relaunched in 2005 and focuses on the following priorities: building an innovative and creative knowledge-based society, developing conditions for a competitive business environment, addressing demographic challenges to ensure greater participation in the labour market, and dealing with Energy and Climate Change. Whilst Slovenia does not foresee significant changes to these, it recognises that the Lisbon Strategy needs to be implemented more effectively in the new Cycle.

The second Cycle will focus, in particular, on the preparation of guidelines for employment, taking into consideration the common principles of 'Flexicurity'. The common principles on 'Flexicurity' are a means of tackling the problems of an ageing population, the decline of manufacturing, the pressures of globalisation and the segmentation of the labour market. A decision on the implementation of the next Lisbon Cycle will be taken during the Spring Council in March 2008. March 2008 under the Slovenian Presidency.

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ESBA OPINION

ESBA welcomes Slovenia's support for the Lisbon Strategy, in particular its focus on implementation in the second cycle. Previous Annual Progress Reports by the Commission on the Lisbon National Reform Programmes have revealed that the importance given to SME policies varies significantly between countries. Emphasising the delivery of general and country specific recommendations is therefore crucial to boost growth and jobs and progress towards its stated objective of making Europe the most competitive and the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. In this context, ESBA has stressed that adopting an EU-wide 'one size fits all' approach to Flexicurity is not advisable. In addition, it is crucial that employment reforms take the 'think small first' principle into account. The dynamic between employer and employee is very different for SMEs than it is for large companies.

Energy and Climate Change

The Slovenian Presidency places the issues of climate change and energy at the top of its agenda. Following the European Commission's initial announcement in January 2007, the EU Council agreed a series of ambitious targets to combat global warming and boost renewable energy at the Spring Summit of March 2007. Support for the subsequent Review of the Climate Change and Energy Package is a key priority for the Slovenian government.

On 23 January 2008, a far-reaching package of new proposals was adopted by the Commission. Its aim is to deliver the European Council's commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 20% and increase the share of renewable energies in energy consumption to 20% by 2020. The Package includes proposals for an updated Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS); specific, binding national targets outside the ETS sectors like transport, buildings, agriculture, and waste; a proposal for a directive to actively promote renewable energies; new rules for carbon capture and storage and new environmental state aid guidelines.

The Slovenian Presidency is counting on the support of and 'decisive action' from Member States in this important, but complex field. In order to set an example for its international partners ahead of the UN Climate Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009, the aim of the current and the following Presidency is that the EU will find an early agreement on the Climate Change and Energy Package – preferably by late 2008 or early 2009.

ESBA OPINION

ESBA fully backs Slovenia's commitment to pursuing the Energy and Climate Change agenda. During 2007, ESBA took an active stance in identifying both challenges and opportunities for SMEs arising from the EU Institutions' proposals. It is therefore crucial EU leaders are aware of SMEs concerns and needs. In this context, ESBA organised its 10th Annual Event on the topic "SMEs and the Future EU Energy Regime." ESBA also joined representatives from the renewable energies, smart grid, fuel cells, hydrogen and building efficiency technology sectors in supporting the advancement of a distributed Green Hydrogen Economy and a Third Industrial Revolution in Europe. It envisages the full participation of 'demand side' actors, including SMEs, in the Climate Change debate and provision of future energy solutions in the EU. ESBA looks forward to working with the Presidency and EU Institutions to achieve this aim.

Better Regulation

The Slovenian Presidency regards the Better Regulation as a top priority of its Presidency. Slovenia has significant experience in the reduction of red tape at home and will actively engage in sharing 'best practice' at a supranational and national level.

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The EU's Better Regulation Agenda, launched in 2005, seeks to ensure that the EU's regulatory environment is simple and of high quality. Actions to achieve this goal include the withdrawal of pending legislative proposals, a strategy to simplify existing legislation, greater emphasis on the use of impact assessments and public consultations, and a programme to reduce administrative burdens on businesses in the EU by 25% in 2012. In order to progress towards the latter objective, the Commission announced in the autumn of 2007 a series of measures: Firstly, the launch of a new online consultation, which invites individual entrepreneurs to identify unnecessary red tape and secondly, the establishment a High Level Group with a mandate to offer advice on the programme's implementation.

Driven by the goal to cut red tape, the Slovenian Presidency will organise a conference, with the European Commission in the first half of 2008 to help identify and reduce unnecessary administrative burdens on businesses. Moreover, the Slovenian Presidency will contribute to a Progress Report on the red tape reduction programme, which will form part of a larger review of the simplification process and overall Better Regulation Package, during its term.

ESBA OPINION

ESBA supports the Slovenian Presidency's initiatives on Better Regulation and Commission's goal to reduce admin burdens – research carried out by the UK FSB, an ESBA member, shows that SMEs spend on average over 7 hours each week filling in forms! Cutting red tape could boost the EU's economy by up to €150 billion. In addition to backing the FSB's work, ESBA is engaged in supporting the High Level Group, to which ESBA Secretary and Vice-President of member association PME Portugal, Gabriel Goucha, has been appointed. Following a measurement exercise carried out by a consortium within 13 priority areas, the High Level Group will examine the burdens and solutions suggested by stakeholders in the on-line consultation and make proposals for further action. Recent experience reveals however that the systematic implementation of impact assessments is still lacking. ESBA will therefore pursue its calls for their rigorous application to all new and amended policy initiatives.

CONCLUSION

ESBA welcomes the priorities of the Slovenian Presidency. Slovenia has set itself an ambitious agenda to prepare the EU for the challenges of the 21st Century with many highly political topics, several of which are highly relevant for small business entrepreneurs.

Progress on implementation of the Lisbon Strategy, at EU and national level, during the second cycle is crucial to achieve its objectives of delivering growth and jobs. Given that SMEs represent 99% of all EU enterprises and account for more than 80% of employment in certain sectors, a particular focus on their needs is important. In addition, ESBA has identified significant opportunities for SMEs to help confront climate change and to participate in the EU's Energy Regime. The promotion of energy efficiency, renewables and biofuels facilitates SMEs' involvement in R&D, for example, and enables them to engage in production. Moreover, bureaucratic form filling and reporting is currently preventing small businesses from fulfilling their role as the drivers of growth and jobs in Europe. A reduction in administrative burdens, will allow entrepreneurs to spend their time developing their businesses, training and supporting the local community - making Europe a better place in which to live and work.

ESBA considers that Slovenia's priorities provide a promising basis for progress in these areas and looks forward to its objectives being transferred into actions and results.

To access the official website of the Slovenian Presidency, please go to:

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<http://www.eu2008.si/en/>

For more information on the Slovenian Presidency priorities, please go to:

http://www.eu2008.si/en/The_Council_Presidency/Priorities_Programmes/index.html

For more information on the Council's 18-month programme, please go to:

www.eu2007.de/includes/Download_Dokumente/Trio-Programm/trioenglish.pdf

CALENDAR

Meetings of Heads of State and Government and of the Council of the EU

European Council

13 - 14 March 2008

19 – 20 June 2008

Economic and Financial Affairs Council

12 February 2008

04 – 05 April 2008

14 May 2008

03 June 2008

Competitiveness Council

25 – 26 February

14 – 16 April

29 – 30 May

Transport, Telecommunications and Energy Council

28 February 2008 – Energy

07 – 08 April 2008 – Transport

06 June 2008 – Energy

12 – 12 June 2008 – Transport and Telecommunications

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

29 January – 02 February

29 February 2008

09 – 10 June 2008

Other SME-related events organised by the Slovenian Presidency

28 – 29 January 2008

Partners for Sustainable Energy Week

31 January – 01 February 2008

Informal Meeting of Council Working Party and High Level Group on Competitiveness and Growth

24 – 26 February 2008

Informal Meeting of the High Level Working Party on Taxation

24 – 25 April 2008

Conference on Integration of Young People into the Labour Market

21 – 22 May 2008

Conference of National Representatives for Consumer Protection on Competition; European Consumer and Competition Day

03 – 04 June 2008

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Conference on European Charter for Small Enterprises

09 June 2008

European Social Fund Conference “ESF Contribution to the Inclusion of Young People in the Labour Market”

11 – 13 June 2008

Round Table: “Impact of Enhancing the European Defense Technological and Industrial Base on Small and Medium Enterprises of the EU Member States”

To access the Provisional Agenda of the Council Meetings, please go to:

http://www.eu2008.si/en/Meetings_Calendar/index.html

To access the Official Calendar of the Portuguese Presidency, please go to:

http://www.eu2008.si/en/The_Council_Presidency/Main_events/index.html

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