Briefing file for Commissioner Thyssen  
Bilateral meeting with Dr. Guy Liagre, General Secretary of the  
Conference of European Churches  
Brussels, 30 June 2015

Scene-setter

- The meeting has been requested by the Conference of European Churches with the aim to present its engagement in the field of employment, social affairs and education. General Secretary Dr Guy Liagre would also be interested to learn about the direction of the new Commission on employment and social affairs, notably Europe 2020, social dimension of EMU and the Working Time Directive.

- The Conference of European Churches was founded after the World War II as a bridge-building initiative of the churches in Europe to overcome the tensions and the Iron Curtain in Europe. Today it brings together 114 member churches from all over Europe – Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, and also Methodist, Baptist and Old-Catholic churches. The Conference of European Churches has been in dialogue with the European Institutions from its beginning.

Main topics on the agenda:

1. Social dimension of the EMU
2. The Europe 2020 Strategy
3. The Working Time Directive

Annexes

- CV of Dr Guy Liagre
- Five Presidents’ report on EMU

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1. The social dimension of the EMU

Speaking points

- Delivering a Deeper and Fairer EMU has been one of the top 10 priorities of President Juncker in his Political Guidelines.

- On 22 June the Five Presidents' Report set out a plan for strengthening the EMU. It contains concrete measures to turn the euro area into a rock-solid architecture. We need a lasting, fair and democratically legitimate basis for the future which contributes to more growth, jobs and prosperity for all citizens.

- These measures are to be implemented during three stages, following a sequence of short-, medium- and long-term steps.

- Better labour market and social performance, as well as social cohesion, should be at the core of the new process of “upward convergence”. I am in favour of developing a set of minimum standards that would guarantee people adequate protection on the labour market. In this context we wish to ensure a 'social protection floor' to protect the most vulnerable in society.

- As regards the process, our aim is to complete the EMU at the latest by 2025. The first initiatives should be launched by the EU institutions as of 1 July 2015. To prepare the transition between stages 1 and 2, the Commission – in consultation with the Presidents of the other EU institutions – will present a “White Paper” in Spring 2017, assessing progress made in Stage 1 and outlining next steps needed.

- What are your views on deepening the social dimension of the EMU?
Background

The Five Presidents' Report sets out three different stages for strengthening Europe's Economic and Monetary Union:

- **Stage 1** or "Deepening by Doing" (1 July 2015 - 30 June 2017): using existing instruments and the current Treaties to boost competitiveness and structural convergence, achieving responsible fiscal policies at national and euro area level, completing the Financial Union and enhancing democratic accountability.

- **Stage 2**, or "completing EMU" : more far-reaching actions will be launched to make the convergence process more binding, through for example a set of commonly agreed benchmarks for convergence which would be of legal nature, as well as a euro area treasury.

- **Final Stage (at the latest by 2025)**: once all the steps are fully in place, a deep and genuine EMU would provide a stable and prosperous place for all citizens of the EU Member States that share the single currency, attractive for other EU Member States to join if they are ready to do so.

To prepare the transition from Stage 1 to Stage 2, the Commission will present a **White Paper in spring 2017** outlining the next steps needed, including legal measures to complete EMU in Stage 2. This follows the model of the Jacques Delors White Paper of 1985 which – through a series of measures and a timetable attached to them – paved the way to the Single European Act, the legal basis of the Single Market project.

(Full report annexed)
2. The Europe 2020 Strategy

Speaking points

- At the start of this Commission we set out a new agenda on economic policy-making: built on investment, continued structural reform and fiscal responsibility. Later this year, we will bring forward proposals to review and synchronise the Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth with this new agenda.

- The fact that the first years of the Europe 2020 Strategy coincided with a severe financial and economic crisis had a significant impact on progress towards the Strategy's goals; it has also meant that short-term policy considerations often prevailed over longer-term approaches.

- The Strategy's headline targets on employment, education and social inclusion provide valuable policy and political focus. Such ambition should remain at the heart of any revision, with renewed policy efforts at all levels to achieve them.

- But the situation is hardly comparable to 2010. While in the area of educational attainment progress has been made, we have experienced increased unemployment, poverty and social exclusion with notably growing divergences within and between countries. This will have to be taken into account in the revision of the strategy.

- What are your views on the review of the Europe 2020 Strategy?
Background

The Mid-term review of the Europe 2020 strategy is awaited as the essential counterpart to recent improvements in the EU's fiscal and macroeconomic policy framework.

The Commission took stock of the results of the Europe 2020 strategy in a Communication in April 2014 and launched a public consultation gathering opinion between May and October 2014.

The Commission published the results of the public consultation in March 2015, together with an up-to-date state of play as regards the Europe 2020 headline targets.

The Commission will take these outcomes into account when it submits its proposals for the review of the Europe 2020 strategy by the end of this year. Such proposals will also be made consistent with current on-going work on deepening the EMU.

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3. Working Time Directive

Speaking points

- My services are carrying out a careful and detailed impact assessment on a range of options concerning the Working Time Directive. This assessment will continue throughout 2015 and it included an extensive public consultation open to all citizens and the civil society earlier this year.

- We are currently carrying out the analysis of these replies and in parallel we are preparing a new implementation report.

- The priority for the Working Time Directive remains to ensure an effective protection of workers' health and safety and to find constructive and balanced solutions that respond to modern needs of both workers and employers.

- Working time is also a key factor that can either facilitate work-life balance (e.g. through certain forms of flexible working time arrangements) or hinder it (e.g. excessively long hours) and this is part of the ongoing reflection on this topic.

- What are your views on this subject?
Defensives (if needed)

In the review of the Working Time Directive, the Commission should consider prohibiting work on Sundays.

- The question of whether weekly rest should normally be taken on a Sunday rather than on another day of the week is very complex, raising issues about the effect on health and safety and work-life balance, as well as issues of a social, religious and educational nature.

- In light of the subsidiarity principle we should consider whether this is an appropriate matter for legislation at EU level. Many would argue that such an issue should be left to national law.

- In fact, regarding the Working Time Directive, the Commission’s primary concern is the protection of workers’ health and safety. As you may know, the European Court of Justice already held in 1996 that the Working Time Directive could not validly include a sentence providing that Sunday should, in principle, be the weekly day of rest in the EU. I am not sure that we would have convincing evidence that rest taken on Sunday is clearly better, in health and safety terms, than rest taken on Saturday.

There is a reference to Sunday in the Young Workers Directive, the Commission should therefore align the provisions by re-introducing that provision in the general Working Time Directive.

- It is true that the Young Workers Directive (in its Article 10) still provides that the ‘minimum rest period […] shall in principle include Sunday’.

- However, in the similar case of the Working Time Directive in 1996, the Court has considered this provision unlawful and annulled it considering that taking rest on Sunday could not, given the evidence available, be justified on grounds of health and safety.

- The Commission considers that the reasoning of the Court in its previous judgement could also apply to the provision of the Young Workers Directive.
Background

Potential issues raised by the Conference of European Churches

Sunday work: The Directive does not regulate the issue of work on Sunday. The Directive requires a minimum weekly day of rest but not that it should be taken on any particular day of the week. The original Directive (1993) did contain a provision stating that as a general rule weekly rest should be taken on a Sunday. But that provision was struck down by the Court of Justice in 1996, because no evidence was before the Court to show why taking rest on Sunday was necessary for health and safety reasons.

Work-life balance: This was already in the past part of the discussions on the revision of the Working Time Directive; a better consideration of such an issue was particularly promoted by the EP. In the context of the interinstitutional negotiations, before the deadlock in 2009, a proposal for a new provision for workers to be provided with a right to ask for flexible working arrangements (with a possibility for the employer to refuse on a justified basis) was discussed; it was not in itself controversial and the negotiations failed on other grounds. Such new provisions are again part of the ongoing review and impact assessment.

Online public consultation on the WTD review

While the Conference of European Churches did not contribute to the recent public consultation on the review of the Working Time Directive, a limited number of religious organisations did. We registered around 20 submissions which explicitly refer to Christian background, mainly from members of the 7th Day Adventists and mainly from Germany and Austria, but also the European Sunday Alliance and Catholic Workers Movements (also from Austria and Germany):

- The main concern expressed by the 7th day adventists is that something like a principle of a work-free Sunday and the duty of the states to protect this should not be included in the Working Time Directive (The religious season for 7th day Adventists is Saturday)
- This is precisely the main issue for the "European Sunday Alliance’ which participated in the Consultation (according to themselves they are "a network of trade unions, employers’ organisations, national Sunday Alliances, civil society organisations and church organisations")
- The two Catholic trade unions from Austria and Germany (plus one individual catholic respondent) also demand the introduction of a work-free Sunday in the public consultation.

State of play and next steps on WTD review:

The Commission is currently undertaking a detailed impact assessment on the review of the Directive, including the online public consultation (01/12/2014 - 18/03/2015; 2,200 replies received). Furthermore, Commission services are preparing an implementation report on the WTD, the results of which will feed into the impact assessment. Should it be considered that an amendment to the Directive is necessary, the Commission will put forward a proposal (timeline: 2016).
Annex: CV of Dr. Guy Liagre

Sinds 1 juni 2012 Secretaris-generaal van de Conferentie van Europese Kerken met zetel te Genève (CH). Hij volgde Prof. Dr. Viorel Ionita op, die als secretaris-generaal a.i. in oktober 2011 met pensioen ging.

Na zijn verkiezing liet Dr. Liagre weten: “Gedurende jaren heeft de KEK eraan gewerkt om ervoor te zorgen dat de christelijke stem niet verloren gaat op Europees vlak. Ik zie het als een uitdaging om als secretaris-generaal van een Europese oecumenische instelling aan de slag te gaan in een tijd waarin Europa en de wereld zo vlug veranderen in iets wat te moeilijk te voorspellen valt. De KEK is volop aan het reorganiseren en ik ben blij om aan deze vernieuwing deel te nemen en deze te stimuleren.”


Naast zijn ambt als voorzitter van zijn eigen Kerk, is hij ook voorzitter van de Belgian Council of Religious Leaders en voorzitter van het Overleg van Christelijke Kerken in België, een organisatie waarin Belgische Kerken (de anglikaanse, de rooms-katholieke, de protestantse en de orthodoxe) samenwerken. Tevens is hij covoorzitter van de Administratieve Raad voor de Protestants-Evangelische Eredienst, die instaat voor de relaties met de Belgische overheid.

Dr. Liagre vertegenwoordigde zijn Kerk in heel wat internationale oecumenische vergaderingen en is ook actief in de World Methodist Council, de World Communion of Reformed Churches en de Community of Protestant Churches in Europe. Hij is voor het ogenblik tevens lid van de commissie Church and Society van de KEK.