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Project Group on the Water Resilience

18 February 2025

Conclusions

Chair Commissioner ROSWALL

Participants: Executive Vice-President RIBERA, Executive Vice-President FITTO, Commissioner HANSEN, Commissioner HOEKSTRA, Commissioner KADIS, Commissioner LAHBIB

Delegates: Head of Cabinet of Executive Vice-President SÉJOURNÉ, Mr L'HUILLIER, Head of Cabinet of Commissioner SÍKELA, Ms SESTAKOVA, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner ŠUICA, Ms LONCARIC, Policy Assistant of Commissioner ZAHARIEVA, Mr NIKOV

Introduction: the key aspects of the Water Resilience Strategy

- The Chair, Commissioner Roswall opened the meeting by setting up the context to develop the Water Resilience Strategy. Water plays a key role for the European competitiveness, food security, energy security, health environment and human health. Each of these aspects needs to be addressed in a coherent manner.
- Other angles which the Water Resilience Strategy should tackle relate to Mr Niinisto report and include preparedness and security aspects.
- The timeline for adoption is scheduled for May/June. The strategy will take the form of a Communication that will be accompanied by a Recommendation to Member States to promote water efficiency first principle.
- In parallel the European Parliament is working on its own-initiative report on Water Resilience.

Themes for discussion

- How ambitious should the Water Resilience Strategy for the next five years be (taking into account rapidly increasing challenges but also political sensitivities linked to issues such as access to, priority for, and cost of water)?
- What is your assessment of the building blocks of the Strategy?
- What are the concrete measures in your policy area that would contribute to water resilience and the competitiveness opportunities related to it and what are the related political sensitivities? What are the possible tangible deliverables in your policy areas?

Main points raised

Water Resilience Strategy – ambition, scope, building blocks:

- Water resilience strategy should be ambitious in terms of involvement of the EU on the topic, but must not put so much pressure on Member States that they cannot cope with it. Water resilience and water management cut across many portfolios so maintaining coherence of the designed measures will be key.
- Innovative approaches should be prioritised. The costs of non-action exceeds the investment needs (according to the EIB there is a 62 billion EUR financing gap per year in terms of agriculture investment).
- Implementation of the already existing legislation needs to be ensured. Any new measures should contribute to the overarching political objective concerning simplification. The Strategy should be ambitious but avoid over-complicated solutions.
- Simplification should also apply to the language understandable to the general public (e.g. broken water cycle not understandable). The Strategy should be communicable to the citizens and stakeholders to foster support and social engagement.
- Water resilience requires synergies with cross-sectoral preparedness, concerning in particular climate adaptation and risk mitigation strategies (including early warning systems, modelling, monitoring and better use of digital tools).
- Securing water supply is crucial for Europe's competitiveness, particularly in high-value sectors with a growing trend such as semiconductors data centres and renewable energy. Mismanagement increases business risks, while water efficiency improvements could save 30% of industrial water use.
- Circular approach towards water reuse includes developing advanced water treatment technologies, strengthening the EU water technology sector, encouraging industrial water reuse, and boosting digitalization in water management. The transition to a circular and water-wise economy should foster innovation and drive job creation.
- The Project Group acknowledged the role of the external dimension of the Strategy and emphasised its alignment with already existing mechanisms such as the Global Gateway. External dimension should be founded on the inclusiveness principle and should ensure identified vulnerable groups are not left behind.

Sectoral policy measures

- The Project Group acknowledged that the Strategy needs to be versatile and respond to various geographical/regional conditions as well as sectoral specificities.
- With regard to agriculture, involvement of farmers should be based on incentivising mechanisms rather than impose additional regulatory burdens. Agriculture and forestry play an important role in water retention, including nature-based solutions and soil investments. CAP should contribute to water resilience.

- Options for sustainably financing water-related actions need to be discussed to avoid overlaps and ensure the best use of existing resources – in particular concerning the cohesion policy and CAP instruments.
- Oceans and aquaculture also provide nature-based solutions.
- Costs should be also analysed from the risk management perspective since investments in water infrastructure will allow to cut restoration costs of extreme weather conditions (floods in particular). Climate mitigation, adaptation and preparedness at larger must deal with water.
- For areas with water scarcity or areas where a supply gap will emerge (increased sustainable use of water will not overcompensate for the rainwater supply) providing technological measures will be key. Desalination, filtration, purification continue to be expensive and will require more research and innovation to better correspond to the water scarcity challenges.
- The external dimension should build on the consideration of the transboundary threats beyond the EU. Global Gateway includes a water agenda. Neighbourhood instruments, building up partnership and alliances should be developed.

Conclusions

- The Chair concluded that there was an overall support for an ambitious strategy based on the outlined direction of travel, and that strands of work should include in particular:
 - strengthening cooperation between Member States and industry stakeholders without overburdening them;
 - explore sustainable financing mechanism to support water infrastructure and management;
 - development of a comprehensive and innovative water management strategy across policy areas;
 - pricing strategies and cost coverage should ensure fair distribution of resources while maintaining economic stability.
- Services will continue working on the preparation of the Strategy taking into account the points raised at the meeting.

The Project Group Secretariat