

Remarks by Vice-President Dombrovskis at the ECOFIN press conference

Thank you Hartwig.

First of all, I would like to congratulate the Austrian Presidency on a very productive ECOFIN meeting today. As the Minister said, we reached agreement on several files improving the functioning of the Value Added Tax (VAT) system in the European Union.

The Ministers today agreed on new rules to improve the day-to-day functioning of the current VAT system until the overall VAT reform strategy has been implemented. These so-called 'quick fixes' would reduce compliance costs and increase legal certainty for businesses. Once the European Parliament has published its report on this file, the new rules should be enforceable by 2020.

The Ministers also adopted a new measure to allow EU countries to align the VAT rates they set for e-publications. Today's decision will ensure an equal tax treatment of paper and digital products – which I think is an important signal we send for the development of the digital single market and, more broadly speaking, for a digital mind-set.

Ministers also formally adopted rules to exchange more information and boost cooperation on criminal VAT fraud between national tax authorities and law enforcement authorities. Without this information exchange, our fight against cross-border VAT fraud cannot be efficient.

And finally, ministers today formally adopted reinforced rules to control illicit cash flows in and out of the EU, an important measure to fight against the financing of terrorism. Today's formal adoption tightens cash controls on people entering or leaving the EU with €10,000 or more in cash. Authorities will be empowered to act on amounts lower than the declaration threshold of €10,000 where there are suspicions of criminal activity. Customs controls will also be extended to cash sent, for example, in postal parcels and to precious commodities such as gold. So we are now calling on the European Parliament to ratify these rules.

The measures adopted today follow the VAT Action Plan which we presented in April 2016 and the Commission's proposals for a deep reform of the VAT system presented in October 2017.

Our common goal should be for EU countries to agree on a much broader reform to cut down on VAT fraud in the EU system, as proposed last year by the Commission. So that we can seriously address problems with VAT collection and VAT fraud.

The cost of this fraud is estimated at around €150 billion in VAT revenues lost every year. So clearly there is still work that needs to be done.

And finally, today we presented our recent proposals aimed at making sure that anti-money laundering rules are enforced effectively across EU countries.

National supervisors will remain in charge. However, we propose to empower the European Banking Authority to ensure an effective information exchange among different supervisors and, if need be, request investigations into alleged breaches of the rules.

The European Banking Authority should, for example, be able to require national supervisors to investigate alleged breaches of individual banks and consider – as a last resort – taking decisions or sanctions. Europe needs to become better at detecting breaches and pinning them down early on.

And I would say that today's first discussion in ECOFIN showed that there is a broad support for his initiative, so I hope we will be able to make practical progress on this.

Thank you.