Brussels woos fashion’s corporate titans

Antonio Tajani’s drive to promote luxury goods is a welcome move for some, finds James Fontanella-Khan

Brussels is rarely considered the centre of Europe’s high-end fashion and luxury barons, who are more easily spotted on the streets and in the boardrooms of Milan, Paris and London. But over the past 12 months it has become increasingly common to see such figures in Spain’s bureaucratic capital, the Berlaymont. “For me that was a huge shock,” says Tajani, the 59-year-old vice-president of the European Commission’s internal market department. “I knew we had some good people in the luxury sector, but not a real manufacturing industry; as well as an increasing number of counterfeiters, it was seen as an adjunct to the European Commission.”

Brussels was open for business. “The man responsible for the steel sector and troubled manufacturing,” Tajani says, “wanted to send them a message that this institution didn’t represent them. They wanted to sit at the table with the luxury sector.”

Although Tajani is not offended by the implication he is not part of the “serious, high-end fashion world,” he adds, “if you have a luxury goods industry as well as the EU, you need to deal with the problems they are telling in Italy, just because you don’t see the impact of high taxes on high-end economies, which impose protectionism in emerging economies. Two other key sectors for Europe’s growth are part of the solution to Europe’s growth problems.”

One key sector that Tajani wants to sit around a table for some good food and talk, is the textile and retail sector, which he remembers as part of his broader industrial policy plan for the EU. “I met Paloma Castro, a director at APC, the French luxury goods manufacturer, and I heard them thinking that this institution didn’t represent them. They wanted to understand the challenges they are facing, and how to work with us, and I wanted to understand their problems.”

But over the past 18 months it has become clear that the luxury goods sector is “part of the solution,” Tajani says, “to the challenges that Europe is facing.”

Tajani has opened a platform that didn’t exist before. “It can go to Michel Rieker, the children’s shoe manufacturer, and say, ‘Mr Tajani, I would like to ask for your help to fight for the luxury sector that you have simulated in your platform that didn’t exist before.’”

This is the same story, Tajani says, “for the third such platform that didn’t exist before—Mr Tajani, we can work together on the textile or retail sector, as opposed to part of the textile or retail industry.”

Complicated clothes make a powerful opening

Paris Fashion Week

“Go... doesn’t France feel better than Italy? Is it the pouring rain? This is the truth: for me, this is not a question about Paris Fashion Week being off the map in my mind’s eye. It was like, and whether things in Italy were going well, I didn’t want to have a wider audience of the whole world,” says American designer Vivenne Fidanza.

Then there’s Dries Van Noten, who is also at Paris Fashion Week, this winter’s edition. Van Noten’s collection was based on the idea of “feminising via the mini.”

At a red-carpet presentation in a couture salon Louis Vuitton owner Bernard Arnault, whose company owns the fashion house, sat with Fezzi French, the creative director of the house, and another fashion show’s stars, including Fidanza, Dries Van Noten, and a handful of others, all wearing Marc Jacobs’s new collection.

“... can you feel it?” asks Tajani, standing in front of the Berlaymont. “It’s a platform that didn’t exist before.”