

Plenary round-up – Strasbourg, December 2019

The December plenary session highlights included the election of the European Ombudsman; commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the Lisbon Treaty and the Charter of Fundamental Rights becoming legally binding; and the award of the 2019 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. Parliament adopted positions on the rule of law in Malta, following the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia, and on public discrimination and hate speech against LGBTI people, including LGBTI-free zones. It also debated statements by the Vice-President of the European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) on the humanitarian situation of the Uyghur in China and in Venezuela and Nicaragua, on the migration and refugee crisis, and on the violent crackdown on recent protests in Iran. Debates took place, inter alia, on Commission and Council statements on: the 30th anniversary of the Romanian revolution of December 1989; the post-2020 EU disability strategy; the COP25 outcome; animal welfare conditions during transport to third countries; and the US Trade Representative's announcement on France's digital service tax. Parliament also voted on appointments to the Executive Board of the European Central Bank.

European Green Deal – extraordinary plenary session on 11 December

During an extraordinary December plenary session, Members debated the [European Green Deal](#) presented by Executive Vice-President Frans Timmermans after its adoption by the European Commission the same day. Outlined in Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's political guidelines, the Green Deal aims to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, while boosting industrial competitiveness and ensuring a just transition for the regions and workers affected. Key aims include preserving Europe's natural environment, a 'farm to fork' strategy for sustainable food, and a new circular economy action plan.

Election of the Ombudsman

In the [election of the European Ombudsman](#), Members chose to re-elect incumbent Emily O'Reilly, following a tight third round of votes against Julia Laffranque (320 votes against 280, out of 600 votes cast). O'Reilly's main priority remains tackling the lack of transparency in national governments' role in EU law-making. The Ombudsman's office represents citizens and others who wish to lodge complaints regarding the actions of EU administrative bodies, and aims at ensuring that EU institutions respect citizens' rights and the principles of good administration.

10th anniversary of the Lisbon Treaty

Parliament commemorated the 10th anniversary of the Lisbon Treaty and that of the Charter of Fundamental Rights becoming legally binding. With the coming into force of [the Lisbon Treaty, the European Council](#) became a formal EU institution, and the anniversary provided an occasion to review the formal and informal changes it brought about in the role of the EU institutions. The new competences added under the Treaty have yet to be fully exploited, however, and represent a rich seam of unused Treaty potential for the future.

European Council meeting of 12 and 13 December 2019

Parliament heard a report on, and debated the conclusions of, the [latest meeting](#) of the [European Council](#), on 12 and 13 December 2019. At this first European Council meeting chaired by the new President, Charles Michel, EU leaders announced an agreement on the objective of achieving a climate-neutral EU by 2050, despite one Member State's inability to commit to implementing this objective at this stage. No agreement was reached on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), but the European Council mandated its President to take the negotiations forward. The Council also considered the proposed Conference on the Future of Europe, and tasked the incoming [Croatian Presidency](#) with working towards defining a Council position, and to engage with the European Parliament and the Commission. EU leaders also discussed a wide range of international issues, including relations with Turkey and Russia.

Sakharov Prize 2019

Parliament awarded its [2019 Sakharov Prize to laureate Ilham Tohti](#). The European Parliament is committed to defending human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the award highlights those who stand up for the right to freedom of expression, safeguard minority rights or champion international law and democracy. Currently imprisoned by the Chinese government (his daughter received the prize on his behalf), Ilham Tohti is a moderate advocate of Uyghur minority rights who eschews radical separatist movements in favour of dialogue with the Han majority. Parliament's President has urged the Chinese government to release Tohti, and called for China to respect minority population rights, particularly in the light of the 'China-cables' exposé of Chinese treatment of the Uyghur.

Joint debate on VAT fraud and payment service providers

Members debated, and approved by a large majority, two reports providing opinions on the proposals for a regulation and directive to better combat VAT fraud in the e-commerce sector. E-commerce is booming, and while it offers opportunities to increase cross-border sales, the EU is keen to avoid that it also allows increased tax fraud. [Tackling VAT fraud related to e-commerce](#) therefore requires robust systems for the transmission and exchange of VAT-relevant payment data (such as who is supplying the goods). Consulted on two European Commission proposals (on maintaining and exchanging electronic payment records), Parliament recommends the establishment of a common EU system for the collection of comparable statistics on intra-Community VAT fraud and the publication of national estimates of VAT revenue losses due to fraud. It also proposes to extend the period during which payment service providers are required to keep information on cross-border payment transactions, from two to three years.

CAP: Flexibility pillars for 2020 and financial discipline from 2021

While there is broad agreement that interim measures are necessary to bridge the funding gap until the MFF can be agreed, the EU still needs to put transitional provisions in place. Parliament's Budgets and Agriculture Committees agreed that those who benefit from EU funding should not suffer harm because of the procedural delays. Consequently, no amendments were tabled to the Commission's proposal for a regulation extending the current rules on flexibility between the pillars of the common agricultural policy (CAP) until the end of 2021, and Parliament approved its first-reading position under a simplified procedure. The stability of EU [farmer income support post-2020](#) is now ensured, as the new regulation extends the 2015-2019 rules on flexibility between CAP pillars, i.e. moving money from national envelopes for rural development to the envelope for direct payments.

EU-Gambia Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement

Members voted in favour of concluding a new [EU fisheries agreement with The Gambia](#), including a proposed annual EU contribution of €550 000. Half of this amount covers access rights for EU fishing vessels to Gambian waters and half should assist The Gambia to develop its fisheries sector in a sustainable manner, including preventing illegal fishing.

This 'at a glance' note is intended to review some of the highlights of the plenary part-session, and notably to follow up on key dossiers identified by EPRS. It does not aim to be exhaustive. For more detailed information on specific files, please see other EPRS products, notably our 'EU legislation in progress' briefings, and the plenary [minutes](#).

