

Plenary round-up – September 2021

During the September 2021 plenary session in Strasbourg, Parliament held a number of debates, including on legislative proposals for health and disease prevention, and the Brexit Adjustment Reserve; as well as on natural disasters in Europe; the Pegasus spyware scandal; media freedom; and on further deterioration of the rule of law in Poland. Members debated Commission and Council statements on the July 2021 'Fit for 55' package of legislative proposals, in the light of the latest IPCC report. Council presented its position on the draft general EU budget for 2022, ahead of the Parliament voting its position during the October II session. Parliament also debated statements from the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission, Josep Borell, on the situation in Afghanistan and in Lebanon. A number of other resolutions and legislative acts were adopted, inter alia on: the instrument for pre-accession assistance (IPA III); a new EU-China strategy; fair working conditions, rights and social protection for platform workers; and on guidelines for Member States' employment policies.

State of the Union

The highlight of this session was European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's [State of the Union](#) address – an important moment to take stock of the year's achievements and present the priorities for the coming 12 months. The coronavirus is still far from conquered, and life – from everyday routines at individual level to global trends affecting the whole world – has entered a phase of profound change. The [six political priorities](#) outlined in this Commission's original mandate have therefore been recalibrated to deliver on promises to tackle climate change, economic challenges, health threats and migration.

Health and disease prevention

Parliament held a joint debate on health and disease prevention. Following the coronavirus pandemic and its effects, efforts continue to strengthen the EU's response to health threats. These include legislative proposals to [boost EU defences against cross-border health threats](#), and to strengthen the [European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control](#) (ECDC). Although responsibility for health policy remains with the Member States, the pandemic has highlighted areas where stronger preparedness measures could better protect EU citizens and address cross-border health threats in future. Parliament debated a Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) report that supports increased consideration of all environmental, animal or human factors with an impact on health, as well as promoting cooperation and transparency – which could lead to smoother joint procurement for items such as personal protection equipment, should that be necessary in future. A further ENVI committee report on strengthening the ECDC was also debated. The committee proposes to extend the ECDC's mandate beyond communicable diseases to cover those that have a wide impact, including cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, cancer, diabetes, and mental illness. Both reports were referred back to the committee, and trilogue negotiations on the two proposals can now begin.

Brexit Adjustment Reserve

Members debated, and later formally adopted, the text agreed following interinstitutional negotiations, on the planned [Brexit Adjustment Reserve](#). Parliament has succeeded in modifying the proposals to ensure support for EU businesses – particularly [fisheries](#) and those in close proximity to the United Kingdom – against the additional costs ensuing from the UK's withdrawal from the EU. A €5 billion budget will be made available over the period to December 2023, with funds distributed using an allocation method taking account of each country's trade with the UK, its fisheries in UK waters, and the population size in maritime border regions neighbouring the UK. Members also adopted measures to adapt the current year's EU budget to cover €1.6 billion in pre-financing for the 'Brexit Adjustment Reserve', under [amending budget No 1/2021](#).

Blue Card Directive

With an ageing population and an increasing need for skilled workers to sustain economic growth, the EU has to compete with other regions to attract highly qualified immigrants. Members debated and adopted a final text resulting from interinstitutional negotiations on the proposed revision of the [EU Blue Card Directive](#). Parliament has long called for the revision of this legislation, which provides a legal route for migration to the bloc, not least in the face of considerable recent refugee movements. Following Parliament's vote on the new rules, skilled applicants will be admitted to remain on EU territory for at least two years if they are able to present a minimum six-month work contract or a binding job offer. Admission to the EU Blue Card scheme should also become more inclusive, with reduced salary thresholds.

EU-Russia political relations

While the 1994 EU-Russia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement remains in force today, relations have deteriorated since 2000. An already strained situation has worsened in the face of aggressive Russian foreign policy in Ukraine and Syria, as well as its repression of domestic dissent. Parliament held a debate on political [relations between the EU and Russia](#), following which Parliament adopted a recommendation to Council, the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The recommendations drafted by the Foreign Affairs (AFET) Committee call for a revision of the current stance, which combines pushing back with constraint and engagement, and proposes to base future relations on six principles. These include activating deterrence against security and hybrid threats alongside dialogue and engagement that offers incentives, such as trade and visas, in support of Russian democratic transformation.

Gender-based violence as a new area of crime

Members adopted an own-initiative legislative report setting out proposals to [add gender-based violence to the list of serious crimes at EU level](#) to enable the adoption of EU legislation in this area. Despite the extent of gender-based violence and the harm it causes, the EU currently has no specific legal instrument to address the issue, and the Member States take different approaches to criminalisation. This means that legal definitions and the level of protection for victims vary across the EU. Adding gender-based violence to the list of particularly serious crimes set out in Article 83(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) would establish a stronger legal basis for the Council and Parliament to adopt a comprehensive directive establishing common legal definitions and common minimum rules for sanctions. Article 83(1) TFEU provides for the list to be extended to new areas of crime that have a 'cross-border dimension resulting from the nature or impact of the offences or from a special need to combat them on a common basis'.

Opening of trilogue negotiations

Members [confirmed](#) three mandates for negotiations: from the Industry Research and Energy (ITRE) Committee on the proposal for a decision on the participation of the Union in the European Partnership on Metrology, jointly undertaken by several Member States, and on the proposal for a regulation on European data governance; as well as from the Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON) Committee on the proposal for a regulation on a pilot regime for market infrastructure based on distributed ledger technology.

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](#).

