Frans Timmermans

Vice-President: European Green Deal

Hearing due to be held on Tuesday 8 October at 18.30 hours.

European Parliament committee responsible: Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI).

Frans Timmermans, born in 1961, was the Party of European Socialists' lead candidate in the 2019 European Parliament elections. First Vice-President of the European Commission since November 2014, Timmermans' current responsibilities include better regulation, inter-institutional relations, the rule of law, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and sustainability. During his term of office he has led the work on the circular economy and plastics strategies, including legislative proposals to reduce plastic pollution and phase out single use plastic products. He was also closely involved in the EU's negotiation, adoption and implementation of the United Nations (UN) sustainable development goals. With regard to the rule of law, he was in charge of the Commission's measures to protect judges in Poland from political control.

Following postgraduate studies in European law and French literature, Timmermans began his professional career in 1987, as a policy officer in the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and served as Deputy Secretary of the Dutch embassy in Moscow from 1990 to 1993. From 1994 to 1995, he worked for EU Commissioner Hans van den Broek, and was Senior Advisor and Private Secretary to Max van der Stoel, the High Commissioner on National Minorities of the OSCE, from 1995 to 1998.

Timmermans became a Member of the Dutch Parliament for the Partij van de Arbeid (Dutch Labour Party) in 1998, and was re-elected five times. He was Minister of European Affairs from 2007 to 2010 and served as Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands from 2012 to 2014.

This is one of a set of Briefings designed to give Members of the European Parliament an overview of major issues of interest in the context of the hearings of the Commissioners-designate. The full set of Briefings can be found at: https://epthinktank.eu/commissioner_hearings_2019

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Background

President-elect Ursula von der Leyen has designated Frans Timmermans as Executive Vice-President responsible for the European Green Deal. His [mission letter](#) puts him in charge of an ecological transition that would help protect the planet and the environment, and make Europe the first climate-neutral continent, while ensuring a just transition for those most affected. Like the seven other Vice-Presidents, he is to steer and coordinate a thematic group of Commissioners. As Executive Vice-President, he will have responsibility for the climate action portfolio, as well as chairing the College of Commissioners in the absence of the President.

The President-elect has tasked Frans Timmermans with presenting the European Green Deal within the first 100 days of the new Commission's mandate and with coordinating work on a new Just Transition Fund. Also in the first 100 days, he should present a new European Climate Law that sets a climate-neutrality target for 2050. A new European Climate Pact should bring together regional and local authorities, civil society, industry and schools to agree on commitments to change behaviours. Tax policies should be reformed in line with climate ambitions, which includes work on a border carbon tax and a review of the [Energy Taxation Directive](#). Another task is mainstreaming biodiversity across all policy areas and work on the Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. Further objectives include the EU zero-pollution ambition, the circular economy and a new 'Farm to Fork' strategy for sustainable food. Moreover, Timmermans is to work on reducing the transport sector carbon footprint and ensuring the blue economy contribution to climate objectives.

Europe has long been a global leader in environmental protection, and notably a champion of global climate action. The EU is committed to taking action to limit global warming to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, in line with the 2015 [Paris Agreement](#). The European Union's [nationally determined contribution](#) – its international commitment – is a 40 % reduction of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 2030, compared to 1990. A long-term EU low carbon strategy is under development, based on the Commission's 'clean planet' strategy, published in November 2018.

For the period to 2020, the EU's [targets](#) are: a 20 % reduction in GHG emissions compared to 1990; a 20 % market share for renewable energy sources; and a 20 % improvement in energy efficiency. These '20-20-20' targets were agreed by EU leaders in 2007, and enacted in the 2009 climate and energy package. With a 22 % reduction in GHG emissions by 2017, the EU is likely to achieve its 2020 GHG target. Achieving the 2020 targets for renewable energy sources and energy efficiency will be more [challenging](#), and will require additional efforts by Member States.

The EU [Emissions Trading System](#) (ETS) is the main instrument for achieving GHG reductions in the electricity sector and other energy-intensive industries. For sectors not covered by the ETS, the Effort Sharing Regulation establishes national emission targets for EU Member States for 2021-2030. Emissions from transport are covered by separate EU legislation. Under the EU's 2014-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), [at least 20 % of the budget](#) across all EU spending areas should be spent on actions related to climate change, and a minimum of 25 % climate-related spending has been proposed by the Commission for the next MFF (2021-2027).

European citizens and populations worldwide benefit from reduced climate change impacts resulting from emission reductions. The EU aims at reducing citizens' vulnerability to climate change impacts through better coordination of [adaptation](#) measures. EU businesses benefit from a level playing field if climate policies are harmonised across Europe and worldwide. A market-based emissions trading system enables industry to reduce emissions at lowest cost. Clarity about future climate policies reduces uncertainty for investments.

While Europe has reduced its GHG emissions, [global emissions](#) have grown by 63 % since 1990 and show no signs of peaking. If GHG emissions are not reduced in the near term, the internationally agreed target of limiting global warming to well below 2°C is likely to be missed. As mitigation of climate change cannot be addressed by unilateral measures in one region, a global effort was

launched in 1992 with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which resulted in the conclusion of the Paris Agreement in 2015.

Recent developments

Climate action

The Juncker Commission has taken a unified approach to climate and energy policy. Maroš Šefčovič was appointed as Vice-President for Energy Union, and Miguel Arias Cañete as Commissioner for both climate and energy. In line with the EU's commitment to provide its citizens and businesses with secure and affordable energy, while also addressing the causes of climate change, the European Commission launched its European energy union strategy in February 2015. The strategy has five inter-related dimensions, one of which is decarbonising the economy. It builds on the 2030 policy framework for climate change and energy agreed in October 2014 by the European Council, which laid down key EU targets to be achieved by 2030 for emission reductions, renewable energy sources and energy efficiency.

The Commission completed all the actions outlined in the energy union strategy, following the guidelines set by the European Council. This happened mainly through a series of legislative packages, which put in place the climate and energy framework for the period up to 2030. The legislative proposals relating to the energy union were agreed by the co-legislators, often with more ambitious targets than in the original Commission proposals and European Council guidelines. A regulation on the governance of the energy union aims to ensuring coherence in the implementation of the policies by Member States and requires Member States to develop National Energy and Climate Plans (NECP) and submit regular progress reports. In June 2019, the Commission published an overall assessment of the 28 draft NECPs, together with country-specific recommendations. Member States have until the end of 2019 to submit their final NECPs.

On the international scene, the Commission played a leading role in negotiations leading to the Paris Agreement and its implementation, and other agreements. The fourth report on the state of the energy union (April 2019) takes stock of the achievements of EU climate and energy policies and points out areas where more efforts are needed.

In the last legislative term, the co-legislators adopted comprehensive legislation to enact post-2020 climate and energy policy. A revised EU Emissions Trading System (ETS) Directive, in line with the European Union's 2030 GHG reduction target, was adopted in March 2018. Regulations on effort-sharing to reduce GHG emissions in the sectors outside the ETS, and on new rules for accounting for and reducing GHG emissions from land use and forestry were adopted in May 2018. In December 2018, the co-legislators adopted a revision of the Renewable Energy Directive that increases the 2030 target for renewable energy market share to 32 %. A Regulation concerning post-2020 emissions trading for the aviation sector, taking account of the development of a global market-based measure in the International Civil Aviation Organization, was adopted in December 2017.

To decarbonise the transport sector, the Commission presented a European strategy for low emission mobility in July 2016 and a European strategy on cooperative, intelligent transport systems in November 2016. In November 2017, the Commission adopted an action plan for alternative fuels infrastructures. A Regulation on monitoring and reporting of CO_2 emissions from heavy-duty vehicles entered into force in July 2018. Another, setting post-2020 CO_2 targets for cars and vans was adopted in April 2019, followed by a Regulation setting the first-ever CO_2 targets for heavy-duty vehicles and a revised Directive on promoting public procurement of clean vehicles in June 2019.

The Commission's October 2018 progress report on climate action, entitled 'EU and the Paris Climate Agreement', estimates that full implementation of the EU legislation adopted in 2018 would result in a 45 % emission reduction by 2030. In November 2018, the Commission adopted the 'clean planet for all' strategy, aiming for a prosperous, modern, competitive and climate-neutral economy by

2050. It analyses scenarios for long-term decarbonisation, as a basis for a debate on the transformation towards an emission-neutral economy.

Sustainable investments

In March 2018, under its capital markets union project and as part of a broader initiative on sustainable development, the European Commission presented an action plan on sustainable finance, to facilitate investments in sustainable projects and assets across the EU.

The Commission presented a package of measures on the financing of sustainable growth in May 2018. The package includes three proposals aimed at establishing an EU taxonomy on sustainable economic activities, improving disclosure requirements and creating a new category of benchmarks to help investors measure the carbon footprint of their investments. A common language for sustainable finance (e.g. a unified EU classification system, or taxonomy) with a framework of uniform criteria would be established, as a way to determine whether a given economic activity is environmentally sustainable.

Financial benchmarks have an important impact on investment flows. Many investors rely on them for creating investment products, measuring their performance and devising asset allocation strategies. The Commission proposes to create a new category of benchmarks comprising low-carbon and positive-carbon-impact benchmarks, by amending the Benchmark Regulation. A proposed regulation on disclosures aims to integrate environmental, social and governance considerations into investors' and asset managers' decision-making processes. It also aims to increase the transparency duties of financial intermediaries towards end-investors, with regard to sustainability risks and sustainable investment targets. This should reduce investors' search costs for sustainable investments and enable easier comparison between sustainable financial products in the EU.

The legislative procedures for the proposals on disclosure and benchmarks are nearly completed, while the proposal on taxonomy awaits a decision in Council.

Circular economy

Policies to enable the transition to a more **circular economy** were a major focus in the last parliamentary term. In 2015, the European Commission adopted a broad package, with an action plan outlining 54 measures addressing various aspects of the circular economy and focusing on five priority areas (plastics, food waste, critical raw materials, construction and demolition, and biomass and bio-based products). A strategy dedicated to plastics was presented in January 2018. Major pieces of legislation adopted in that context include updated rules on waste, introducing in particular new recycling targets; a new Regulation on fertilising products encouraging the recycling of nutrients in agriculture; a Directive on port reception facilities for collecting waste from ships; and a Directive to curb marine litter from single-use plastics and fishing gear. A Directive to reduce the use of lightweight plastic carrier bags was adopted earlier in the term. International developments relevant to waste management in Europe include recent amendments to the Basel Convention on hazardous wastes, which will subject cross-border shipments of plastic wastes (either hazardous or hard-to-recycle) to the Convention's control mechanisms, i.e. require exporters to obtain the 'informed consent' from the receiving country before the shipment can take place. Another significant development for the EU waste sector is China's decision to ban the import of certain waste material, including plastic waste, which came into effect in January 2018. The country used to receive 85 % of the EU's plastic waste exports.

Priorities and challenges

President-elect von der Leyen's political guidelines

In her political guidelines for the next Commission, President-elect Ursula von der Leyen outlines a plan for a European Green Deal that would set Europe on a path towards becoming the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. She presents this as the 'greatest challenge and opportunity of our times', requiring decisive action, investment in innovation and research, a redesign of the EU economy and an updated industrial policy. Specific actions would include extension of the Emission Trading System to the maritime sector and gradual reduction of free emission allowances for airlines. To ensure a level playing field for European companies, a carbon border tax, compliant with World Trade Organization rules, would be introduced gradually. The Energy Taxation Directive would also be reviewed. Von der Leyen promises to propose the European Green Deal in her first 100 days in office, as well as to enshrine the 2050 climate-neutrality target in a new European climate law.

To support the people and regions most affected by the transition towards climate neutrality, the political guidelines announce a new Just Transition Fund. The need for greater motivation and education would be addressed by a European Climate Pact, gathering together regions, local communities, civil society, industry and schools to develop and commit to a set of pledges to change behaviour, by everyone, from individual citizens to large multinational companies. A Sustainable Europe Investment Plan would help to mobilise around €1 trillion of investment over the next decade.

As part of the plan for a 'European Green Deal', the political guidelines include commitments to present a biodiversity strategy for 2030; a 'Farm to Fork Strategy' on sustainable food along the whole value chain; a cross-cutting strategy to protect citizens' health from pollution, covering air and water quality, hazardous chemicals, industrial emissions, pesticides and endocrine disrupters; and a new circular economy action plan focusing on specific sectors (textiles and construction); as well as to tackle micro-plastics.

The strategic agenda 2019-2024, adopted in June 2019 by the European Council, sets out a vision on a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe. Key missions entrusted to the EU under this initiative include further improvements to the urban and rural environment; enhancing the quality of air and water; promoting sustainable agriculture; and leading efforts to fight biodiversity loss and preserve environmental systems, including oceans. The agenda stresses the need for a deep transformation of the EU economy and society to achieve climate neutrality, conducted in a way that is socially just and accommodates national circumstances. The emergence of new social movements like the 'yellow vests' and 'Fridays for future' underlines the importance of the social aspects of the low-carbon transition.

Following up on the Commission's **clean planet strategy**, the EU will develop its long-term low-carbon strategy under the Paris Agreement. The European Council intends to finalise its guidance before the end of the year, with a view to the adoption and submission of the EU's long-term strategy to the UNFCCC in early 2020. This is also a priority for the Finnish Council Presidency. A large majority of Member States favour climate neutrality in the EU by 2050 – in line with the previous Parliament's position – but the June 2019 European Council could not reach a unanimous conclusion on the date.

In international **climate diplomacy**, the climate change conference in Santiago de Chile (COP 25, 2019) is expected to finalise the rulebook for the Paris Agreement by completing negotiations on article 6 (international carbon markets). Negotiations on implementing the agreements on climate action in the aviation and shipping sectors will continue in the International Civil Aviation Organization and the International Maritime Organization.

Biodiversity conservation – an important concern for a majority of citizens – is a pressing challenge. The first global assessment of the state of nature, released by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) in May 2019, points to an unprecedented and accelerating decline. It warns that human activity, responsible for significant alteration of 75 % of the land-based and about 66 % of the marine environment, is driving one million species to extinction. At its meeting in October 2020, the conference of the parties to the UN

Convention on Biological Diversity (including the EU) is expected to adopt the [post-2020 global biodiversity framework](#), with conservation goals for the next decade. In this context, the Commission could put forward a successor to the EU biodiversity strategy, reflecting developments at international level.

Public opinion

A 2017 special Eurobarometer [survey](#) showed that protecting the environment is important for 94 % of Europeans. Respondents considered climate change (51 %); air pollution (46 %); and the growing amount of waste (40 %) to be the most important environmental issues, followed by the pollution of rivers, lakes and ground water (36 %). A 2018 [poll](#) conducted for the European Parliament revealed that 75 % of EU citizens support increased EU action on environmental protection.

In the Spring 2019 [Eurobarometer](#) survey, climate change and environment was one of the topics that rose in importance: 43 % of respondents said that these issues should be debated as a matter of priority during the electoral campaign, a gain of 3 percentage points compared to the previous edition. Among the respondents that intended to vote in the European elections, climate change was ranked as the most important topic (55 %). Combating climate change and environmental protection was the top issue in seven Member States (Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Belgium, Luxembourg and Germany), two more than in the September 2018 edition.

First results of Parliament's [post-electoral survey](#) show that among the top issues that impacted on citizens' voting decisions, combating climate change and protecting the environment rank second (together with promoting human rights and democracy, 37 %), following economy and growth (44 %).

The latest Standard Eurobarometer [survey](#) released in August 2019 confirms that environment and climate change are issues of increasing concern to Europeans.

European Parliament

Treaty basis and European Parliament competence

EU environmental policy is based on Articles 191 to 193 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Article 11 TFEU also requires environmental protection to be taken into account in other EU policies (a process known as 'mainstreaming'). Combating climate change has been an explicit EU objective since the Lisbon Treaty. Article 191 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) lists climate action as one of the objectives of EU environmental policy.

Environmental policies are a shared competence between the EU and Member States, and subject to the ordinary legislative procedure (co-decision by Parliament and Council), with the exception of fiscal matters, town and country planning, land use, quantitative water resources management, choice of energy sources and structure of energy supply, which require unanimity in the Council. For the EU to become a party to international agreements, the Parliament must give its consent.

In the area of **climate action**, the Parliament is co-legislator under the ordinary legislative procedure. The Parliament set out its views on the energy union in its [resolution](#) of December 2015, reiterating its calls for more ambitious targets for energy efficiency and renewable energy. In the legislative process, the Parliament succeeded in raising the 2030 targets beyond the levels set out by the European Council. A parliamentary delegation participated in the annual UN climate conferences, notably the COP21 in Paris. In preparation of the 2018 climate change conference in Katowice, Poland, the Parliament adopted a resolution advocating a 1.5°C global warming target and calling for a 55 % emission reduction in the EU by 2030. In March 2019, the Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on climate change, welcoming the Commission's 'clean planet strategy' and calling for an overarching approach towards achieving net zero emissions by 2050.

A strong advocate of the transition to the **circular economy**, Parliament has been a supporter of ambitious policies in the field to date. Its long-standing demands to the Commission in relation to [resource efficiency](#) include a call for a review of eco-design legislation and relevant product-policy

legislation, for the gradual inclusion of mandatory resource-efficiency requirements for product design, and for new public procurement procedures to encourage circular products and business models. Encouraging the uptake of secondary raw materials, e.g. by considering the introduction of requirements on minimum recycled content in specific products, and dealing with chemicals of concern to ensure the development of non-toxic material cycles, have also been important issues for Parliament in recent years.

Improving the implementation of environmental legislation is a key **cross-cutting priority** repeatedly underlined by Parliament over the years, most recently in relation to waste. Overarching initiatives that the Parliament has indicated that it expects from the Commission in the near future include, besides the proposal for an eighth environmental action programme, a comprehensive framework strategy on the implementation of the sustainable development goals in the EU, with a review mechanism to assess progress. In its April 2018 resolution, it called explicitly on the Commission to dedicate 'a priority area' to sustainable development, environment and climate in the new legislative term.

FURTHER READING

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