

Virginijus Sinkevičius

Environment, Oceans and Fisheries

Hearing due to be held on Thursday 3 October at 14.30 hours.

European Parliament committees responsible: Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) and Fisheries (PECH).



Born in 1990, Virginijus Sinkevičius is, at 28, the youngest Commissioner-designate. Lithuanian Minister of Economy and Innovation since November 2017, he has also been a member of the country's parliament (the Seimas) since November 2016, standing for the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union, of which he is a deputy leader. He sits on the Committee on Economics, which he chaired between November 2016 and November 2017, and was a member of the Commission for Ethics and Procedures between June 2017 and April 2018.

Outside politics, he has worked as an author and editor for 'The Lithuania Tribune' news portal, from 2011 to 2015, as assistant project manager at the Centre for European Policy Analysis in Washington DC (2013-2014), and as project manager at the public entity, Lithuanian Post (2014). In 2015-2016, Sinkevičius was

Project Coordinator at Lithuanian Airports, a state enterprise, and in 2016, he headed the Group for Regulatory Affairs at the governmental investment promotion agency, Invest Lithuania.

Sinkevičius holds a degree in economic and social studies from Aberystwyth University (United Kingdom) and a Master's in European studies from the University of Maastricht (The Netherlands). He also received training in the Office of the Prime Minister of Lithuania and at the Lithuanian Mission in Washington DC (USA).

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

Background

Dating back to 1972, EU **environment policy** aims for a 'high level of protection'. It is guided by multiannual environment action programmes (EAP). The [7th EAP](#) runs until 2020. EU environmental protection legislation covers a wide range of policies. To tackle **air** pollution, it sets ambient air quality standards; maximum limits for emissions of certain air pollutants in Member States; and rules on emissions from specific sources (including vehicles, ships, energy and industry). EU legislation further regulates **chemicals**, mainly through the [REACH](#) Regulation, governing the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals; and the [CLP](#) Regulation on product labelling. Several laws aim to protect **nature** and biodiversity, most notably the [Birds](#) and [Habitats](#) Directives, providing the basis for the Natura 2000 network of protected areas. Legislation aims at improving **waste** management, in line with the [waste hierarchy](#), and sets requirements for waste streams. EU environmental law also protects **water** resources, setting quality standards for drinking and bathing water, as well as requirements for flood management. The EU is a party to many international environmental [agreements](#). Funding for environment, nature conservation, and climate-related projects is provided through the [LIFE](#) programme, which has a budget of €3.4 billion for 2014-2020.

The EU **common fisheries policy** (CFP), launched in 1983 and reformed most recently in 2013, is aimed at ensuring that EU fisheries are sustainable – environmentally, economically and socially. The 2013 reform introduced the target of achieving sustainable exploitation of all stocks by 2020, meaning that fish stocks must be restored and maintained above levels capable of producing the maximum sustainable yield (MSY). It provided major tools supporting this objective, in particular the adoption of multiannual plans, and the obligation to land all catches intended to end the wasteful practice of discarding unwanted fish at sea. The European Maritime and Fisheries Fund ([EMFF](#)), with a budget of €6.4 billion for 2014-2020, provides structural support for fishing and related activities. From a wider perspective, the fisheries sector is now treated as part of the **blue economy** encompassing all established and emerging activities related to the potential of the oceans.

Recent developments

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. A [strategy](#) dedicated specifically to plastics was presented in January 2018. Major pieces of legislation adopted in that context include [updated rules](#) on waste; 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 had been adopted earlier in the term. On **air quality**, [updated reduction objectives](#) were adopted for five key air pollutants.

Building on the reformed CFP, the EU progressed towards achieving sustainable use of fisheries resources in its waters and beyond. A major step was the adoption of a series of multiannual plans, covering the [Baltic Sea](#), the [North Sea](#), the [Western Waters](#) and the [western Mediterranean](#). The landing obligation, phased in from 2015 to 2019, now applies to all species subject to catch limits or minimum fishing size. To limit fishing impact on marine ecosystems, the EU overhauled its [technical measures](#), and banned controversial electric pulse trawl fishing from 1 July 2021. The EU also revised management of all EU fishing activities outside EU waters, with a new system of authorisations for the [external fleet](#).

Priorities and challenges

An important concern for [a majority](#) of citizens, **biodiversity conservation** is a pressing challenge. The first [global assessment](#) of the state of nature released in May 2019 by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services points to unprecedented and

accelerating decline, warning that human activity, responsible for significant alteration of 75 % of the land and about 66 % of the marine environment, is driving 1 million species to extinction. The conference of the parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (including the EU) in October 2020 is expected to adopt the [post-2020 global biodiversity framework](#), with conservation goals for the next decade. The Commissioner-designate is asked to present a new EU biodiversity strategy for 2030 and to ensure that the EU leads the way to an ambitious international agreement.

Tackling pollution is another priority. [Data](#) from the European Environment Agency (EEA) show that **air pollution** remains too high across Europe. The two EU Ambient Air Quality Directives are currently undergoing a [fitness check](#), the results of which are expected to be published by the end of 2019. The World Health Organization (WHO) is revising its air quality guidelines, with an expected publication date in 2020. [Parliament](#) has recently called on the Commission to bring EU air quality legislation into line with the latest WHO limit and target values, urging it to propose the introduction of more stringent compliance values for fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}).

Ensuring compliance with EU **water quality** legislation also remains [challenging](#). According to the [EEA](#), 60 % of Europe's surface waters do not meet the required quality standards. EU water legislation is also the subject of a [fitness check](#), expected to be completed in autumn 2019.

In June 2019, the EU Council issued [political guidance](#) on priorities for an EU strategy for sustainable **chemicals** policy. The Commission was asked to present the EU strategy for a non-toxic environment which, under 7th EAP commitments, was due by 2018; develop, with the European Chemicals Agency, an action plan on dossier compliance for REACH; improve REACH authorisation and restriction procedures; and address the risk and regulatory management of substances in recovered materials, aiming at non-toxic material cycles (a key issue in transition to a [circular economy](#)), working with the European Chemicals Agency. On the **circular economy**, the new Commissioner will be responsible for preparing a new action plan geared towards sustainable resource use, especially in sectors such as textiles and construction. Focus is also required on tackling **micro-plastics** and implementing existing legislation on plastics.

As regards fisheries, **implementation of the reformed CFP** is a work in progress and will continue over the 2019-2024 term, particularly on issues such as the management of stocks at sustainable levels, development of multiannual plans and effective application of the landing obligation. The [revision](#) of the fisheries control system, launched in May 2018 with a view to improving its efficiency, is an important ongoing topic.

Currently, the CFP authorises Member States to restrict access to their coastal waters within 12 nautical miles of their coast, and up to 100 miles for the outermost regions. This derogation to the principle of equal access expires on 31 December 2022, and by then, the EU must adopt the measures that are to apply afterwards. On this occasion, a wider **evaluation of the CFP** is expected, including issues less covered so far, e.g. the social dimension, climate adaptation and clean oceans.

The EU promotes **international ocean governance** based on multilateral dialogue, in line with its 2016 [oceans agenda](#). The EU will contribute to the 2020 UN [Ocean Conference](#) in Lisbon, supporting implementation of UN sustainable development goal 14, on conserving and sustainable ocean use; and to negotiations on a new [UN agreement](#) on marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction, a key milestone in future ocean governance. In addition, the EU is active in regional fisheries management organisations ([RFMOs](#)), international bodies responsible for conservation of fish stocks, and maintains its bilateral network of [fisheries agreements](#) with non-EU countries.

As the world's largest market for fish products importing two thirds of what it consumes, the EU is a major player in combating **illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing**. Preventing the import of IUU-caught products is a priority, and the EU [IUU Regulation](#), including a [procedure](#) for non-cooperating countries that may lead to trade sanctions, is widely recognised as effective.

A **new fisheries fund**, [revising](#) the EMFF, was proposed in June 2018, to underpin the CFP during 2021-2027. Parliament established its first-reading position in April 2019, and negotiations with the

Council are imminent. The new fund will apply in the context of World Trade Organization discussions on reaching a global agreement to ban fisheries subsidies that contribute to overfishing.

Future EU-UK fisheries relations, along with management of over 100 common fish stocks in the north-east Atlantic and North Sea, depend on the **Brexit** process. Issues at stake include EU fishing vessel activities in UK waters from France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Belgium, Germany, Spain and Sweden; as well as UK seafood export access to its main destination, the EU market.

European Parliament

Treaty basis and European Parliament competence

EU **environmental policy** is based on Articles 191-193 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Article 11 TFEU also requires environmental protection to be 'mainstreamed' in other EU policies. The EU and Member States share competence on environmental policy, which is subject to the ordinary legislative procedure (OLP – co-decision by Parliament and Council), with some exceptions requiring unanimity in Council (Article [192 TFEU](#)). The EP must give its consent for the EU to become a party to international agreements.

Conservation of marine biological resources, the core of the **common fisheries policy**, is an exclusive EU competence ([Article 3 TFEU](#)). Common fisheries resource law is implemented through EU regulations directly applicable in the Member States. Other fisheries policy areas fall under shared competence between the EU and Member States ([Article 4 TFEU](#)). The OLP applies to the CFP under [Article 43\(2\) TFEU](#), however fixing and allocation of fishing rights is the sole preserve of the Council under [Article 43\(3\) TFEU](#). Council concludes international fisheries agreements after obtaining Parliament's consent ([Article 218 TFEU](#)).

During the previous term, Parliament helped shape several laws related to the circular economy, to air quality, and to climate change issues. It was also active on [pesticides](#), setting up a special committee in the wake of controversy over the renewed approval of glyphosate. Parliament adopted first-reading positions on two water-related legislative proposals, on revision of the [Drinking Water Directive](#), and on minimum requirements for [water reuse](#) (now awaiting trilogue negotiations).

Parliament also contributed to shaping EU law on fisheries, including key developments such as adoption of multiannual plans, a new framework for technical measures and a revised authorisation system for the external fleet. Parliament also adopted resolutions supporting the update of legislation, preceding major initiatives such as the revision of the fisheries control system.

FURTHER READING

[EU policies – Delivering for citizens: Environmental protection](#), EPRS, European Parliament, 2019.

[EU policies – Delivering for citizens: Fisheries](#), EPRS, European Parliament, 2019.

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