

Plenary round-up – March I 2021

The highlight of the March I 2021 plenary session was the official signature of the Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe, allowing the Conference's work finally to get under way. Another important point was the celebration of International Women's Day, which was held just before the start of the session, with Kamala Harris, Vice-President of the United States of America, and Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister of New Zealand, addressing the plenary in video messages, and Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, also participating, in the chamber.

The main debates held during the session concerned the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic – focusing on investment, competitiveness and skills, as well as the proposed action plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, in preparation for the Social Summit in Porto in May. Members also discussed the application of the rule of law conditionality mechanism, respect for the partnership principle in the preparation and implementation of national recovery and resilience plans, and ensuring good governance of the expenditure of EU funding. Proposals on the European Semester annual strategies, corporate due diligence and corporate accountability, as well as the InvestEU and EU4Health programmes, were also debated and voted.

Parliament also adopted a resolution declaring the EU an LGBTIQ Freedom Zone. Members debated government attempts to silence free media in Poland, Hungary and Slovenia. Debates were held on reforming the EU policy framework to end tax avoidance in the EU following the OpenLux revelations. Members debated statements by High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission, Josep Borell, on the current political situation in Georgia and on the continuing conflict in Syria.

Conference on the Future of Europe

The formal signature, by the presidents of the EU institutions, of the recently endorsed [Joint Declaration](#) on the [Conference of the Future of Europe](#), an initiative long supported by Parliament, allows the Conference to begin its work to engage with citizens' concerns. As direct representatives elected by people in EU countries, Parliamentarians are keen to contribute along with citizens themselves, to building a truly Citizen's Union. The day-to-day work will be managed by the Executive Board, on which the European Parliament will have three representatives plus four observers. The Conference will aim to complete its work in spring 2022.

InvestEU programme

Members debated and approved, by a large majority, an interinstitutional agreement on the proposed [InvestEU programme](#) regulation, designed to streamline investment support and now adjusted to tackle the post-coronavirus investment landscape. Parliament has been fierce in its advocacy for adequate resources to finance the recovery, securing a €1 billion top-up for the EU guarantee and measures that could mobilise an extra €35-40 billion in investment through incorporating European Investment Bank legacy portfolios. Thanks to the Parliament's efforts, the proposals now include the possibility for Member States to use InvestEU funding to provide capital support for otherwise viable small and medium-sized businesses that have been hard-hit by the pandemic.

EU4Health programme

Parliament approved, by a large majority, the establishment of a dedicated EU health programme – the [EU4Health programme](#), for which Parliament had already negotiated an additional €3.4 billion during the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework negotiations. The programme will focus on support for measures with clear EU added value: combating cross-border health threats, ensuring affordable medicine and promoting stronger health systems.

Ombudsman's annual activity report for 2019

Parliament elects the European Ombudsman at the beginning of each parliamentary term, and discusses own-initiative reports on its activity annually. The Ombudsman's [annual activity report for 2019](#) was discussed in the presence of the Ombudsman herself, Emily O'Reilly. Members adopted the resolution on the Committee on Petitions' report on the Ombudsman's activity by a large majority. The Ombudsman reported on a wide range of issues where she has investigated complaints and initiated enquiries into possible maladministration by EU institutions or agencies. In 2019, these included senior EU staff appointments, ongoing transparency issues in the Council and Eurogroup, and the treatment of disabled people and asylum-seekers. While the institutions complied in most cases with the Ombudsman's recommendations in the interests of good administration, the annual report makes some key recommendations for further action on: decision-making accountability in the Council; public access to documents; interviews with asylum-seekers; appointment procedures; and on citizens' participation in EU policy-making.

Fisheries control

Members debated and adopted Parliament's negotiating position on the proposed revision of the EU [fisheries control](#) system, which seeks to modernise rules that have been in force for monitoring EU fishing activities since 2010. The report from Parliament's Committee on Fisheries supports the new rules in general, whilst also seeking to protect small fishing vessels, and reserving the imposition of CCTV onboard for those who commit infringements. While fisheries control is an exclusive EU competence under the common fisheries policy, EU countries are responsible for controlling their fishing activities, with the European Commission checking that they fulfil their responsibilities correctly. Advances in technology allow more effective controls to protect fish stocks, and the rules are therefore being revised.

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](#).

