

Plenary round-up – March 2024

Among the highlights of the March 2024 plenary session were the debates on preparation of the European Council meeting on 21 and 22 March 2024; the need to address urgent concerns regarding Ukrainian children forcibly deported to Russia, and the need to ensure the stability of EU agricultural production and impose sanctions on imports of Russian and Belarusian food and agricultural products to the EU. Members also debated the return of Romanian national treasure illegally appropriated by Russia.

Other important debates took place, inter alia, on: deteriorating living conditions in the EU; a healthy lifestyle and active ageing; the inclusion of the right to abortion in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, rising anti-LGBTIQ rhetoric and violence; and EU climate risk assessment. Members also discussed the annual designation of European capitals for children, and the Commission's treatment of requests for public access to documents.

Representatives of the world cup-winning Spanish women's national football team participated in Parliament's official celebration to mark International Women's Day. The last 'This is Europe' debate for this term followed a speech by [Petteri Orpo](#), Prime Minister of Finland.

Revising financial rules, and guidelines for the 2025 EU budget

Members debated and adopted a provisional agreement on changes to the EU's [financial rules](#). The new rules are needed to align with changes in the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework (MFF), aimed at ensuring more transparent, digital and value-based EU funding. Members also debated and adopted Parliament's guidelines for the [2025 EU budget](#), which the Committee on Budgets (BUDG) insists should be people-centred, prioritising investment that improves people's lives and EU competitiveness. The adopted guidelines set Parliament's position ahead of the Commission's adoption of the draft 2025 budget, which will be debated in Parliament in the new term.

Protecting our environment

Green claims

Parliament debated and voted a report at first reading on a proposal to regulate '[green claims](#)'. The report from the Committees on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) and on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection (IMCO) sets a timescale for verification of environmental claims and labelling schemes, which must be tailored to the complexity of the claim and company size.

Waste Framework Directive

Members adopted at first reading a proposal aimed at accelerating the fight against food waste and pushing textile producers to act to reduce clothing waste, by amending the [Waste Framework Directive](#). The ENVI committee report on the proposal seeks to raise binding reduction targets in food processing and manufacturing to 20 % by 2030, and to 40 % per capita in retail, catering, food services and households.

Industrial pollution

The Industrial Emissions Directive sets rules on [industrial pollution](#) in the EU, including from industrial farming. Members adopted a provisional political agreement to update these rules. The ENVI committee succeeded in substantially amending the proposal, to include mining and battery production, placing 'best available technique' principles at the heart of granting permits, and setting binding environmental performance limit values for water. However, to lighten the administrative burden, governments must put e-permitting in place by 2035. ENVI Members also successfully introduced a 2026 deadline to reassess the need to address cattle farm emissions (currently excluded), and those from imported agricultural products.



Protecting EU businesses and consumers

Compulsory licensing of patents

Members voted at first reading on a proposal to clarify rules on the [compulsory licensing of patents](#). The Committee on Legal Affairs (JURI) report proposes a number of changes, including that voluntary agreements should have greater priority than compulsory licensing, and licensees, not the rights-holder, should be responsible for any liability linked to a product. The Commission should have to identify all rights-holders, who would be paid for compulsory licences used within a set timeframe. When necessary, the Commission should compel rights-holders to disclose (against remuneration) trade secrets and know-how.

Toy safety

The EU Toy Directive helps to ensure toys sold in the EU are safe for our children. Members voted on an IMCO committee first-reading report that seeks to reduce the number of unsafe toys still sold in the EU. IMCO wishes to see digital product passports available for 10 years, for example, and linked to the Safety Gate Portal – allowing us all to report risks. The committee also proposes that the Commission provide small businesses with assistance to comply with the stricter [toysafety](#) rules.

EU customs

A central EU customs authority could offer traders lower compliance costs and ensure a more efficient, fraud-proof customs union. Members voted at first reading on proposals to establish an [EU customs](#) data hub and an EU customs authority. While the IMCO report on the file is generally supportive of the proposal, it would like to see a swifter process and a platform allowing everyone to report non-compliant goods.

Product design

Members adopted a provisional agreement on two files seeking stronger protection for [product design](#) against counterfeiting. Endorsed by the JURI committee, the agreement should future-proof design protection, protect registered designs for five years, renewable to a maximum 25 years (for a fee), liberalise the spare parts market, and give EU governments three years to transpose the EU rules into national law.

Protecting our democracy and the rule of law

Media freedom act

Members debated and adopted a provisional agreement on a regulation setting the first-ever EU rules on media freedom, pluralism and protecting journalists – the European [media freedom act](#). Under the new rules, governments must respect editorial freedom and exempt journalists from identifying their sources. Media companies will have to make their ownership structures public, and EU countries will investigate cases where media outlets become too concentrated. To protect journalists from government spying, Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) succeeded in eliminating 'protecting national security' as grounds for surveillance and ensured that all public authorities have to publish information about their annual advertising expenditure, including online.

Penalties for violating EU sanctions

Parliament adopted a political agreement reached with the Council on a proposal to harmonise criminal offences and [penalties for violating EU sanctions](#), such as arms embargoes. The agreed text envisages criminalising the commission of certain crimes involving serious negligence and maintains fines proposed by the Council at 1 % or 5 % of companies' total worldwide turnover (or €8 million or €40 million respectively), a choice left to Member States.

Freezing and confiscation of criminal money

Europol estimates the proceeds from organised crime in Europe at around €139 billion per year. Little of this money is confiscated. Members adopted a provisional agreement, reached after three rounds of trilogue negotiations with the Council, on a directive covering [freezing and confiscation of criminal money](#). The Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) proposed a wider scope for the directive and to use confiscated property in the public interest.

Protecting our freedom of movement

Cross-border associations

Parliament has long called for EU rules to help non-profit organisations to operate freely across borders. Members debated and voted at first reading on a JURI committee report, which although largely in favour of the Commission's proposal, highlights the need for stricter definitions in regulating [cross-border associations](#), and for such associations to be treated in the same way as other non-profits. LIBE Members propose that a minimum of three people should sit on their boards, and that such organisations should also pledge respect for European values, with funding blocked for those who breach them.

European Maritime Safety Agency

Members considered and voted at first reading on a Committee on Transport and Tourism (TRAN) report on a proposal to revise the framework of the [European Maritime Safety Agency](#) (EMSA), assigning it new roles on safety and sustainability and providing the means to carry out these revised objectives. The TRAN committee wants to see EMSA supervise European coast guard cooperation, support inspection training, monitor suspicious behaviour around pipelines and carry out other new functions.

Question time – EU governments' preparedness to combat foreign interference, including from Russia

Věra Jourová (Vice-President of the Commission) answered Members' questions on the [EU preparedness to combat foreign interference](#), an increasing phenomenon, particularly in the light of Russia's attempts to undermine support for Ukraine, as well as cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns in the run-up to the European elections.

Opening of trilogue negotiations

One decision to enter into interinstitutional negotiations, from the Foreign Affairs (AFET) and Budgets (BUDG) committees, on establishing the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, was [approved without vote](#).

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](#).