

EU-Iceland: close and reliable partners

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On 9 November, the European Parliament and the Parliament of Iceland's delegations met remotely for their 13th Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) meeting to discuss the state of EU-Iceland relations, cooperation in the times of COVID-19 and current challenges and future developments in the Schengen area.

[Andreas Schwab](#), Chair of the European Parliament's Delegation for Northern cooperation and for relations with Switzerland and Norway and to the EU-Iceland Joint Parliamentary Committee and the European Economic Area (EEA) Joint Parliamentary Committee (D-EEA), chaired the meeting. The Icelandic delegation was led by its chair, Sigridur Andersen. The meeting saw the participation of the Iceland Foreign Affairs, Gudlaugur Thor Thordarson.

Bilateral relations

Mr Thordarson emphasised the need to continue the cooperation in these unprecedented times, in particular as regards economic recovery, climate change and future relations with the UK. He reminded the JPC that the EEA Agreement is the cornerstone of EU-Iceland relations and underlined some of the current challenges confronting it, such as the decision making process of some EU agencies posing a threat to the EEA Agreement's two-pillar architecture.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iceland also expressed his country's wish to review the 2015 EU-Iceland agreements on further liberalisation of trade in food and agricultural products, as new difficulties and needs have appeared.

Good cooperation

Deputy Chair of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) Working Party, Amalie Weidner, representing the Presidency of the Council of the EU, praised the good cooperation during the COVID-19 crisis on issues such as education, research and innovation.

Head of the Western Europe Division, European External Action Service, Clara Ganslandt, also referred to the good relations during the pandemic, informing that the EEA Joint Committee incorporated eleven COVID-related measures by an urgent procedure.

Ms Ganslandt showed understanding towards Iceland's concerns regarding the future cooperation with the UK and reminded the JPC that frequent consultations are ongoing with EEA EFTA States in relation to this issue.

Challenges ahead

MEPs congratulated the way Iceland handled the first wave of the pandemic, but inquired about the reasons for the increase in the number of cases in the second wave and about the new restrictive measures, in particular as regards travelling.

Ms Andersen reflected upon the consequences to fundamental freedoms resulting from restrictive measures introduced by governments in order to flatten the curve and safeguard hospitals' capacity. During the first wave, Iceland adopted restrictive measures when the curve was already going downwards, and therefore there was no time for a proper assessment of the effectiveness of such measures. Mr Thordarson added that restrictive emergency measures cannot be kept for a long time, and countries must learn to live under the 'new normality'.

Focus on youth

Icelandic MP Hanna Katrín Fridriksson raised the question on what impact the COVID-19 restrictions are having on the younger generation in terms of education, development of social skills and their future more broadly. The D-EEA Chair agreed that both EU and Iceland have to pay particular attention to the wellbeing of younger generations.

Development of Schengen

Replying to Ms Andresen's inquiry about the EU's views as regards outsourcing the handling of asylum applications to third countries, D-EEA Chair Schwab argued that this measure is not realistic at the time being. As regards the future development of Schengen, he pointed at the new possibilities offered by the deployment of the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS). The system would facilitate border crossings while increasing security and helping to reduce irregular migration and health risks.