German Presidency outlines priorities to EP committees

Ministers are outlining the priorities of the German Presidency of the Council of the EU to parliamentary committees, in a series of meetings.

Germany holds the Presidency of the Council until the end of 2020. A first series of hearings took place from 3 to 16 July. A second set of hearings happened during the first week of September.

Hearings held on 1, 2 and 3 September

Constitutional Affairs

On 1 September, MEPs of the Constitutional Affairs Committee quizzed State Minister for Europe Michael Roth on the preparations for the Conference on the Future of Europe. Roth acknowledged that “the level of ambition differs from one institution to the other”, but insisted that “all have to pull in the same direction” and agreed with most members that citizens should get a centre stage.

The statute of the European Ombudsman, the EU Transparency Register, rule of law, the future EU-UK relationship, the EP’s right of inquiry and the reform of the electoral law were also raised in the debate.

Culture and Education

On 1 September, Commissioner for Culture and Media Monika Grütters reassured Members of the Culture and Education Committee that managing the Covid-19 consequences for culture was a priority for the EU in the coming months. She expressed support for the request of the committee to “earmark” EU recovery funding, in order “to make it possible for 1-2% of EU expenditure to flow into culture and media measures”.

Members used the opportunity to ask the German presidency to support the EP demands to properly fund Erasmus+ within the next Multi-annual Financial Framework for 2021-2027. They also called for the Council presidency to focus on accessibility to online learning across Europe, the future of the sports sector, mobility of apprentices, cultural and language diversity, freedom of expression, the cross-European dimension of cultural and creative projects, and inequality.
among Member States in their support for culture and media.

**Economic and Monetary Affairs**

During their discussion with German finance minister Olaf Scholz on 2 September, Economic and Monetary Affairs Committee MEPs focussed largely on the EU’s recovery package, and attempts at establishing new own resources to finance the EU’s recovery.

Most MEPs taking the floor pressed Mr Scholz to reach concrete and good progress on establishing new own resources, notably to ensure the proper financing of the EU’s economic recovery commitments. They noted that progress to date has been far too little. A few however also raised concerns that new instruments agreed could lead to the EU becoming a transfer union. Mr Scholz assured that legislation on new own resources will be a major priority of the German Presidency. Taxation legislation, notably possible progress on tax transparency and a financial transaction tax, was also raised by some MEPs.

**International Trade**

Mercosur, the agreement between the EU and four Latin American countries, figured prominently in questions from Members of the International trade Committee, following Economic Affairs and Energy Minister Peter Altmaier’s presentation of Presidency’s priorities in trade policy. MEPs consider the reform of the WTO, the investment agreement with China, and EU-US trade relations as further critical issues to tackle during the presidency.

Altmaier emphasised the presidency’s intention to conclude ongoing trade negotiations among EU institutions on the enforcement regulation and on dual use products.

**Fisheries**

On 3 September, Food and Agriculture Minister Julia Klöckner underlined that the top priority in the field of fisheries is reaching a political agreement on the future EMFF (European Maritime and Fisheries Fund) and that any compromise will need to be compatible with ongoing WTO negotiations on harmful subsidies. The Presidency is very optimistic that an agreement on the Eastern Baltic cod measures should be reached during the second round of negotiations at the end of September. Important decisions are also expected on the quotas and total allowable catches for 2021.

Regarding Brexit, the Minister reiterated the need to defend the interests of the EU fishing and processing industries, while at the same time ensuring that stocks are managed in a sustainable way; preparations are ongoing for all scenarios, including the possibility of a no-deal before the end of the year.

**Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs**
In the exchange of views with Members of the Civil Liberties Committee, Justice Minister Christine Lambrecht explained that the Presidency will focus on increasing the resilience of the justice systems post-COVID-19 by concentrating on its further digitalisation. Regarding the Rule of Law, the German Presidency intends to organise discussions in the Council in the follow up to the Commission's Annual Rule of Law Report.

Other issues raised included MFF, Rule of Law conditionality, hate speech, child sex abuse online, the e-evidence proposals, the use of facial recognition and the EU's accession to the European Convention of Human Rights.

Development

On 3 September, Niels Annen, Minister for State, at the German Federal Foreign Office, told the Development Committee that the presidency has two main priorities on humanitarian aid. Firstly, it will put emphasis on anticipatory humanitarian action – pre-determined, pre-financed activities that, based on a credible forecast, enable early action ahead of crises to save lives, mitigate the impact of crises, - including on climate change, and promote a common EU position. Secondly, it will promote respect for compliance with international humanitarian law and humanitarian space.

In the debate, MEPs questioned, among several topics, how the Presidency was planning to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had a huge impact on humanitarian crises by increasing health-related needs, and worsening the economic situation of vulnerable populations.

Germany holds the Presidency of the Council until the end of 2020. The first series of hearings is taking place from 3 to 16 July. A second set of hearings will take place in September. This press release will be updated regularly.

Hearings held on 13, 15 and 16 July

Foreign Affairs

On Monday 13 July, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas stressed that intensifying the political and economic cooperation with African countries will be high on the Presidency's agenda. When it comes to China, the Foreign Minister made clear that the EU can only progress in its relations with China if it continues to speak with one voice. He expressed his hope of organising a top-level meeting between the EU and China as soon as possible.

Regarding the EU's ties with Russia, Mr Maas said that the EU's policy on Russia cannot be reassessed until there is an end to the violence in eastern Ukraine. On EU enlargement, he
underlined that he was pleased that the EU had agreed to open accession negotiations with both Albania and North Macedonia. MEPs also quizzed Heiko Maas on EU policies vis-à-vis Russia, China and Turkey, the situation in Syria and Libya, foreign interference and disinformation and the ongoing talks between Serbia and Kosovo to resolve their territorial disputes.

**Transport and Tourism**

On 13 July, Federal Transport and Digital Infrastructure Minister Andreas Scheuer highlighted that the EU needs to learn from the COVID-19 crisis and have in place a common realistic way to evaluate an emergency, including a cross-border emergency mechanism for freight traffic. He explained that the next six months will be dedicated to recovery and getting mobility up and running again, whilst transforming into a more climate-friendly and efficient sector, and benefitting from the opportunities digitalisation offers.

MEPs criticised the lack of coordination between the member states during the crisis and asked the German Presidency to give due attention to rail transport and passenger rights.

**Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs**

The common migration and asylum policy reform took centre stage in the debate with Interior Minister Horst Seehofer on 13 July in the Civil Liberties Committee. While it is not possible to finalise the legislative work this year, the German Presidency will try to broker a political agreement in the most important areas, based on solidarity, fairness and efficiency, Seehofer promised. MEPs quizzed him on search and rescue activities and legal migration, which he sees as a key element of any migration strategy, but that does not imply "unconditional free access to Europe".

Seehofer emphasised the need to enhance cooperation between security forces in the EU and ensure appropriate funding for agencies contributing to the security of EU citizens. Answering MEPs’ questions on extremism and radicalisation, the Minister stressed that tackling right-wing extremism is one of the German presidency's priorities.

**Security and Defence**

On Tuesday 14 July, Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer pointed out that the COVID-19 crisis will mark the Presidency's defence and security policy. She told MEPs that the Presidency would focus on European resilience. Europe has not been able to act when it comes to hybrid threats, which includes the scenario of a pandemic, she said.
Ms Kramp-Karrenbauer also talked about European sovereignty, stressing that the EU needs to have more capabilities and assets, especially in relations with NATO. She emphasised the importance of the European Peace Facility, when it comes to the participation of third countries in EU missions.

**Agriculture and Rural Development**

Finalising the Transitional regulation for 2021-2022, to bridge the gap between the soon-to-expire Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) rules and the not-yet-agreed future ones, and agreeing on a negotiating mandate on the CAP reform in October, will be key priorities, Food and Agriculture Minister Julia Klöckner told MEPs on Wednesday 15 July. The Presidency will also focus on animal welfare, digitalisation and reducing food waste. Farm to fork, Biodiversity and EU Forest strategies will also be on top of the presidency’s agenda, the Minister said.

MEPs in the debate denounced the European Council’s attempts to decide unilaterally on EU farm policy matters and insisted that they need to be decided jointly by the Parliament and the Council. Many speakers called for a two-year long CAP transitional period and stressed that Farm to Fork strategy measures should be designed and implemented with farmers and not against them. Several MEPs also criticised the detrimental effects of trade deals on EU farmers and called for fairer distribution of direct payments both within and among member states.

**Environment, Public Health and Food Security**

On Thursday 16 July, Food and Agriculture Minister Julia Klöckner said that ensuring sufficient and safe food availability will be crucial in emerging from the COVID-19 crisis. Mrs Klöckner highlighted the Farm to Fork Strategy and agreeing on EU CAP reform as the main priorities for the Presidency, along with working to create an EU-wide nutrition labelling scheme and animal welfare label as well as reducing food waste.

Several MEPs raised questions about the biodiversity strategy, pollution from farming, animal welfare and protection of pollinators through reduction of pesticides use. They also debated organic food and protecting EU farmers including in EU trade agreements with non-EU countries.

**Employment and Social Affairs**

On Thursday 16 July, Labour and Social Affairs Minister Hubertus Heil told MEPs that solidarity and strengthened social security would be high on the agenda, with a legislative proposal for a minimum wage and Council conclusions on basic social security systems expected in autumn.
On artificial intelligence (AI) and platform work, Minister Heil said that technological and social progress should go hand in hand and that AI should not replace employees, but support them. Ensuring human rights and working conditions in global supply chains as well as finding an agreement on the coordination of social security systems within the year, are also amongst the priorities.

Members’ questions focused on the health and safety of workers, the state of play of an EU unemployment reinsurance scheme, a stronger youth guarantee, the rights of people with disabilities and ensuring gender equality when designing policies. Several Members stressed that cross border and seasonal workers need better social protection and housing conditions.

**Industry, Research and Energy**

Speaking to the Industry, Research and Energy Committee, Economic Affairs and Energy Minister Peter Altmaier said that the Presidency will seek to move forward on the Industry and SME strategies. European key technologies should be enhanced and European value chains should remain secured in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, he said.

Peter Altmaier also highlighted that the industrial strategy should help Europe keep a level playing field with certain countries, which, on global markets, support their businesses as a way of expanding their share. He also spoke in favour of moving forward on the EU Hydrogen strategy. "We all want the Green Deal to be a success", he said. At the same time, the upcoming revision of 2030 goals to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions "needs to be organised in such a way that there is a predictable growth prospect for our key industries", he added.

**Regional Development**

Peter Altmaier, Minister for Economic Affairs and Energy, underlined that EU structural funds have been crucial in tackling the impact of the current crisis. In order to step up support for regions and citizens, he confirmed the Presidency’s aim to finalise the work on React-EU as swiftly as possible. Moreover, the Presidency is committed to concluding negotiations on the cohesion package by the end of the year. For that reason, negotiations will be resumed (Common Provisions Regulation, ERDF/Cohesion Fund, Interreg) and initiated (Just Transition Fund) shortly after the summer break.

Regional Development Committee members reiterated their call to maintain an ambitious budget for EU regions, any cuts to cohesion policy in the future MFF being unacceptable, in the committee’s view.
Hearings held on 3, 6 and 7 July Women’s Rights and Gender Equality

On Friday 3 July, Franziska Giffey, Minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, told the Women’s Rights Committee that the presidency has two main priorities on gender equality. Firstly, to tackle the lack of equality between men and women on the labour market, notably by presenting an Equal Pay Directive in November. Secondly, to put an end to all forms of gender-based violence, notably by pushing for the Istanbul Convention to be ratified by all member states, and establishing a single, European-wide helpline for women in emergency.

In the debate, MEPs asked the Minister how she was planning to make progress on the Women on Boards Directive, which has been blocked in the Council by eight member states, including Germany. “I will hold targeted discussions and I will fight very strongly to make headway on this file”, she replied. Several MEPs also called for all EU policies, including the next MFF and the recovery plan, to include a gender perspective.

Environment and Public Health

On Monday 6 July, Health Minister Jens Spahn told the Environment and Public Health Committee that, following the COVID-19 pandemic, coordinating EU health policies and strengthening crisis management, increasing EU production of essential medicinal products and devices (such as face masks) and creating a European health data space are the top German priorities. MEPs questioned the Minister on the future EU health policy, vaccine strategy and medicine and protective equipment shortages.

On Tuesday 7 July, Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety Minister Svenja Schulze said that the German priorities include agreeing on the climate law with a 2030 target, an EU biodiversity strategy, the circular economy including extending the lifespan of products, and digitalisation. How to get the EU recovery package in line with the EU Green Deal, Climate Law, MRV shipping, forest and agricultural policies including animal welfare were some of the issues raised by MEPs.

Internal market and consumer protection

On 7 July, Economic Affairs and Energy Minister Peter Altmaier highlighted that the recovery fund is crucial in emerging from the COVID-19 crisis. Strengthening the single market through digitalisation will also be high on the agenda. Mr Altmaier told MEPs that the presidency will support the development of data infrastructure for European initiative Gaia-X, aiming to improve interoperability, availability and storage of data within the EU.
The presidency will also aim at protecting consumers from hate speech, disinformation and unsafe products, addressing the challenges posed by artificial intelligence (AI) and will focus on effective enforcement of EU consumer laws, Justice and Consumer Protection Minister Christine Lambrecht ensured the committee.

MEPs’ questions focused on the presidency’s views on regulating online platforms, in particular on the upcoming Digital Services Act, competition rules and the EU's digital and industrial sovereignty, the green and digital transitions, support for SMEs, the diversification of supply chains, and the options for regulating AI, amongst other topics.

Committee on Legal Affairs

On Tuesday 7 July, Justice and Consumer Protection Minister Christine Lambrecht talked about how the repercussions of the COVID-19 crisis on the restrictions to freedom of expression, rule of law and the increased spread of disinformation and hate speech online must be tackled. She confirmed that the future framework for AI, the intellectual property rights strategy, digitalisation of justice, and corporate social responsibility will be the main focus of upcoming meetings.

The Committee Chair welcomed the ambition shown by the Presidency and highlighted that the next six months will be crucial for the future of Europe and will shape the rest of the Parliament’s term. Several MEPs talked about the lack of coordination and interoperability of COVID-19 tracing apps, the independence of the judiciary in the upcoming rule of law mechanism, the priorities of the Digital Services Act and reiterated the need to finally break the deadlock on the ‘women on boards’ and ‘country-by-country reporting’ files in the Council.
Further information
Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Human Rights
Subcommittee on Security and Defence
Committee on Development
Committee on International Trade
Committee on Budgets
Committee on Budgetary Control
Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs
Committee on Employment and Social Affairs
Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety
Committee on Industry, Research and Energy
Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection
Committee on Transport and Tourism
Committee on Regional Development
Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development
Committee on Culture and Education
Committee on Fisheries
Committee on Legal Affairs
Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs
Committee on Constitutional Affairs
Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality
Committee on Petitions

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