Swedish Presidency debriefs EP committees on priorities

Ministers outlined the priorities of the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU to parliamentary committees, in a series of meetings.

Sweden holds the Presidency of the Council until June 2023 included. Hearings took place between 23 January and 9 February.

Environment, Public Health and Food Safety

On January 23, Climate and Environment Minister Romina Pourmokhtari told the MEPs that the priorities are: climate and biodiversity including the “Fit for 55” files, circular economy, the war in Ukraine’s impact on food security and energy prices, the UN conference on climate change (COP28), nature restoration and zero-pollution (air, water, waste). MEPs questioned the minister on several files including nature restoration, deforestation, energy, COP28, circular economy, pollution, pesticides, and transport of waste. They also sought assurances that the Swedish Democrats would not block Council’s work on climate and biodiversity.

Later that day, for Social Affairs and Public Health Minister Jakob Forssmed and Health Care Minister Acko Ankarberg Johansson highlighted health care support for Ukrainian refugees, tackling shortages of pharmaceutical products, access to medical devices, the European Health Data Space (EHDS), antimicrobial resistance (AMR), mental health, fight against cancer and preparedness for future health crisis as priorities. MEPs questioned the two ministers on their plans on shortage of medicines, early surveillance, data sharing, AMR and mental health issues.

On 9 February, Minister for Rural Affairs Peter Kullgren told MEPs that the Swedish priorities related to food are: the Farm to Fork strategy, the sustainable use of pesticides, simplifying directives on foodstuffs (“Breakfast Directive”), food information to consumers, animal welfare, the bio-economy, forestry, plant health, food security, continued support to solidarity lanes to Ukraine, the Black Sea Grain Initiative, and organic pet food. MEPs questioned the minister on nature restoration, the sustainable use of pesticides, forestry, large predators, sustainable farming and fisheries (trawling) and the quality of water.
Economic and Monetary Affairs

ECOFIN President and Finance Minister Elisabeth Svantesson said on 24 January that the Presidency would be prioritising a macro financial instrument for supporting Ukraine, tax evasion and avoidance legislation, the finalisation of the banking package and the anti-money laundering rules update, and the economic governance review. On economic governance, she said the hope was to reach a consensus among member states by March regarding the road ahead.

MEPs asked about the state of the debate in Council on the new own resources for the EU budget, specifics about what funds could be earmarked for Ukraine, how the Presidency planned to steer the debate on the economic governance review, and about the next steps for the EU's green strategic investment fund as a result of the US Inflation Reduction Act.

Internal Market and Consumer Protection

On 24 January, Johan Forssell, International Development Cooperation and Foreign Trade Minister, emphasised the Presidency's readiness to support Ukraine and address rising inflation and the energy crisis. They plan to advance on several files, including construction products, empowering consumers for the green transition, products made using forced labour and short-term rentals. The Presidency also hopes to begin negotiations on several digital priorities, namely on the AI Act and the rules on political advertising.

Several MEPs questioned the minister on the Single Market Emergency Instrument, improving European competitiveness, better enforcement of internal market rules and the AI Act. The customs code, right to repair, online video games, biometric mass surveillance, free trade agreements and environmental protection issues were also discussed.

Foreign Affairs

On 24 January, MEPs questioned Foreign Affairs Minister Tobias Billström on two outstanding issues: what will the Presidency do to ensure that Ukraine is supported with most modern arms, including tanks, and to take a tougher stance against Iran regime. They also want to know what the Presidency can do to speed up NATO membership of Sweden and Finland.

The minister told MEPs that the Presidency will focus on providing humanitarian, military economic and political support for Ukraine. He also added that it is vital to ensure full accountability for the crimes of aggression. They will work on close EU-NATO cooperation and follow security developments in Western Balkans and eastern Mediterranean. They will also pay
special attention to the fight against hybrid and cyber-attacks, said the minister.

**Fisheries**

On 24 January, **Rural Affairs Minister Peter Kullgren** told MEPs that the upcoming Commission’s report on the review on the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) will deserve great attention, as it allows to assess how well CFP is working and to reach common goals. He also mentioned the forthcoming initiative on energy transition in EU’s fisheries and aquaculture sector, to support the Green Deal targets as priority files.

In addition, the Minister said he is confident that a compromise among co-legislators can be reached on the fisheries control system. Furthermore, the Presidency is in favour of extending the network of sustainable partnership agreements, including a deal with the UK that is in its final steps.

**International Trade**

On 24 January, **International Development and Foreign Trade Minister Johan Forssell** mentioned four priorities: continued support for Ukraine’s recovery through trade policy, negotiations on free trade agreements with third countries, the partnership with the US as well as including the digital and green transitions in the EU trade agenda.

MEPs demanded swift progress on trade agreements with Mexico, Chile, New Zealand and Australia. The pending ratification of the trade agreement with Mercosur is a priority, with the new government in Brazil seen as an opportunity. MEPs also quizzed the Presidency about its strategy to respond to the US Inflation Reduction Act. Further priorities included the Anti-coercion Instrument and the Generalised Scheme of Preferences, as well as trade relations with China and Taiwan.

**Employment and Social Affairs**

**Minister for the elderly and social security Anna Tenje** and **Minister for Gender Equality and Deputy Minister for EmploymentPaulina Brandberg** told MEPs on 24 January that the Presidency priorities include: strengthening social dialogue at EU level, tackling the risk of accidents and ill health in the workplace (particularly the directives on asbestos and chemical agents at work), and ensuring the smooth running of the European semester.
Specific legislative files high on the Presidency's agenda include platform work and pay transparency as well as the coordination of social security systems. Finally, the Presidency is committed to promoting the rights of children (European Child Guarantee), persons with disabilities and the homeless, and will organise a conference on social inclusion and access to adequate housing on 4 April.

**Industry, Research and Energy**

On 24 January, **Ebba Busch, Minister for Energy, Business and Industry**, said that the Presidency will launch negotiations on the digital identity directive and the data act. In the field of energy, priorities include ongoing negotiations on renewable energy and energy efficiency and starting talks on the energy performance of buildings and reducing methane emissions. The Presidency will also continue negotiations in the Council on gas market legislation.

Ms Busch also said that the Presidency will work to ensure that green technology industries relevant to the energy transition remain in Europe. Finding an agreement with MEPs on legislation on semiconductors (the "Chips Act") is also among the priorities.

**Mats Persson, Minister for Education**, said that the Presidency will facilitate access to research and the quality of research infrastructure. The Presidency will also take forward the negotiations on the Chips Joint Undertaking. In the area of space, the Presidency will work for fair and sustainable access to space and guide the discussions in the Council.

**Development**

On 25 January **Johan Forssell, Minister for International Development Cooperation and Foreign Trade**, highlighted three priorities: unwavering support for Ukraine and the acute humanitarian crisis caused by Russia's invasion; global health and better preparation for the next pandemic; and, a cross-cutting effort to tackle corruption worldwide. Minister Forssell also hoped to secure the imminent signature by member states of the Post-Cotonou agreement.

MEPs questioned the Presidency's commitment to development following domestic cuts to spending on development, and questioned whether broadening the global donor base would be a priority. MEPs also flagged as important issues climate change and its impact on debt burdens and biodiversity loss, migration, and the EU's Global Gateway initiative.

**Regional Development**
On 25 January, Minister for Rural Affairs Peter Kullgren highlighted as priorities: the war in Ukraine and related security and energy issues, the need for more competitiveness and for speeding up the EU’s green and digital transformation as well as the role of cohesion policy in helping to achieve these priorities. The Presidency will look into delays in implementing the 2021-2027 funds and on the investments into people in line with the EU’s Year of Skill initiative.

MEPs expressed disappointment that cohesion policy itself was not mentioned among the priorities and quizzed the minister on his plans to tackle the challenges facing cohesion policy, rural areas and local governance. They also called for new financial resources to speed up the energy transition.

Security and Defence

On 25 January, Defence Minister Pål Jonson said the Presidency has three priorities: support for Ukraine, the implementation of the strategic compass and of the EU’s strategic partnerships with like-minded partners.

Some MEPs stressed the need to increase the supply of heavy combat equipment to Ukrainian armed forces and discussed the ongoing process of Swedish and Finnish membership of NATO, asking the Minister also about the tensions with Turkey. Sweden's industrial capacities in the defence field, boosting the European Peace Facility and implementing the joint procurement instrument for military equipment, the EDIRPA, were also discussed. MEPs finally underlined that the EU must not forget about other regions in the world of strategic importance such as the Indo-Pacific region and Africa.

Women’s Rights and Gender Equality

On 25 January, Minister for Gender Equality Paulina Brandberg said the Presidency will prioritise work on the EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention and negotiations on a directive on combating violence against women, gender budgeting, tackling human trafficking and the inclusion of gender equality in all policy areas. They will also try to advance negotiations on legislation on binding standards for equality bodies and on anti-discrimination.

MEPs pointed out that when Prime Minister Kristersson spoke to the Parliament on 17 January, he did not mention gender equality; they questioned whether Minister Brandberg has the backing of the rest of the government on gender equality issues. Stressing the lack of access to abortion in Poland, they asked what actions the Presidency will take to address the shortcomings in the rule of law in Poland.
Constitutional Affairs

On 25 January, EU Affairs Minister Jessika Roswall stated that the Presidency hopes for positive developments on the EU’s ratification of the European Convention on Human Rights, addressing unanimity-related deadlocks on crucial geopolitical matters by activating so-called passerelle clauses, as proposed by the Conference on the Future of Europe, as well as any proposals from the Conference not requiring Treaty changes. She expressed reservations on the reform of the EU electoral law, the statute and funding of European political parties and the establishment of an EU independent ethics body.

MEPs demanded concrete timelines for next steps on these topics and on Parliament’s call for a Convention to revise the Treaties. Some MEPs expressed frustration over the lack of progress on Parliament’s right of inquiry, while others pointed out the need to finalise negotiations on political advertising prior to the 2024 European elections.

Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs

On 30 January, Minister for Justice Gunnar Strömmer highlighted the proposals related to the war in Ukraine: core international crimes, asset recovery and confiscation, and criminalising violations of EU sanctions. He also highlighted proposals to digitalise judicial procedures and law enforcement capabilities, revise the Schengen Borders Code and extend the area to Bulgaria and Romania.

MEPs stressed the importance of combatting violence against women, and highlighted the new Anti-Money Laundering package and the Media Freedom Act. Finally, several MEPs asked for a clarification on the influence of the Sweden Democrats on the government’s policies.

EU Affairs Minister Jessika Roswall asserted the Presidency’s commitment to protecting the rule of law and that the next steps in “Article 7” proceedings on the respect of rule of law should be expected in the spring.

MEPs asked for concrete action on the Article 7 proceedings, more political will in enforcing EU rules and for more transparency. They expressed concerns about the continuous deterioration of the rule of law, as well as the lack of progress in this area.

Migration Minister Maria Malmer Stenergard explained that the discussions on the asylum and migration management regulation are gaining momentum and that the Presidency will push for a negotiating mandate; they will possibly hold a first negotiation in June. She reconfirmed the Presidency’s commitment to conclude negotiations on the pact before the European elections in
MEPs insisted that the Council should deliver on its promises to engage in the reform of the Dublin system and called for a human rights monitoring mechanism. Other MEPs want measures to prevent push-backs or quotas to limit migration.

Transport and Tourism

On 31 January, Minister for Infrastructure and Housing Andreas Carlson stressed that the Presidency will put a lot of effort into the green transition, will seek to finalise “Fit for 55” package, progress on TEN-T and Single European Sky rules and ensure the EU’s independence from fossil fuels. The Presidency is also looking forward to starting work on digital drivers’ licence rules and the green transport package as soon as it is presented by the Commission.

Transport Committee MEPs shared the Presidency’s ambition to ensure a balance between the green transition, decarbonisation and business competitiveness. They welcomed the minister’s pledge to try to reach an agreement with Parliament on remaining rules in the “Fit for 55” package. Some MEPs urged the Presidency not to forget workers’ rights in the transport sector.

Agriculture and Rural development

On 31 January, Rural Affairs Minister Peter Kullgren said that ensuring food security is one of the most important priorities, particularly to facilitate exports from Ukraine by supporting measures such as solidarity lanes, the Black Sea Grain Initiative and the Grain from Ukraine programme. The Presidency also aims to reach a common position in Council on geographical indications for wine, spirit drinks and agricultural products and on Farm Sustainability Data Network files.

The implementation of the Bioeconomy Strategy and finding a compromise on the Sustainable Use Regulation for pesticides will also deserve attention. Finally, the Minister announced that three conferences will take place to better prepare future revisions of EU legislation on animal welfare, bioeconomy and environmental practice within the CAP.

Culture and Education

On 6 February, Schools and Education Minister Lotta Edholm said the Presidency will continue to coordinate educational support for children fleeing the war in Ukraine. She committed to advancing the work on a European education area, the automatic mutual recognition of higher education and “green skills” in education.
MEPs stressed the need to advance also on the automatic recognition of learning outcomes and vocational qualifications. They called on member states to step up the fight against racism and hate speech in education and inquired on plans to follow up on the demand made by the Conference on the Future of Europe for an EU civic education curriculum.

Parisa Liljestrand, Minister for Culture, said she will push for EU ministers to agree on support for Ukrainian artists who fled Russia's military invasion. The main priority will be the proposed Media Freedom Act with the aim of reaching a Council position by May.

MEPs quizzed the minister on specific measures in the media freedom act proposal, as well as its legal basis and the possible contradiction to the Amsterdam protocol on the system of public broadcasting in the member states.

Social Affairs and Public Health Minister Jakob Forssmed said the focus will be the mental health of young people and in particular the subject of loneliness. He promised to work on a Council resolution on EU youth dialogue, to involve young people in EU policy making as well as on strengthening the European model of sports.

MEPs called on the Presidency to advance on the implementation of the “EU Youth test” to evaluate the impact of new proposals on young people and to come up with initiatives in the area of video games.

Legal Affairs

On 28 February, Justice Minister Gunnar Strömmer told MEPs the Presidency will focus on four areas in the justice agenda: Ukraine, competitiveness, individual rights and the environment. When it comes to Ukraine, the minister stressed two directives: criminalising the violation of sanctions and asset recovery and confiscation. He also highlighted upcoming work on the intellectual property framework and protecting the geographical indication of crafts. Individual rights should be strengthened in the area of parenthood recognition and protecting journalists and human rights defenders against abusive lawsuits. Corporate sustainability due diligence and the environmental crime directive are also among the priorities.

MEPs inquired on his position on AI liability and on the recognition of parenthood. MEPs also quizzed the minister on a series of other issues such as the intellectual property framework, insolvency law, migration and hate speech.
Contacts

Federico DE GIROLAMO
Press Officer / Editorial Coordinator

📞 (+32) 2 28 31389 (BXL)
📞 (+33) 3 881 72850 (STR)
📧 (+32) 498 98 35 91
✉️ federico.degirolamo@europarl.europa.eu