

Payments in the EU: Council confirms political agreement to reduce charges and increase transparency

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The EU is working towards making payments in euro cheaper. Soon, paying or withdrawing money in euros will cost the same price at home or anywhere in the EU.

EU ambassadors today endorsed the provisional agreement reached between the presidency and the European Parliament on aligning the costs of cross-border payments in euros between euro and non-euro countries and increasing the transparency of charges related to currency conversion services across the EU.

Today's agreement is a major step for consumers and businesses in the single market. We are not only reducing the charges for payments in euros within the EU, but also ensuring that charges related to currency conversion services are more transparent allowing consumers to make informed decisions.

Hartwig Löger, minister of finance of Austria, which currently holds the Council presidency

Since 2002, the same charges have applied to cross-border and national payments in euros within the euro area. At the same time, cross-border payments in euros from non-euro countries are subject to high fees.

The Council confirmed the agreement reached with the Parliament to align the charges for cross-border payments in euros for services such as credit transfers, card payments or cash withdrawals with the charges for corresponding national payments of the same value in the national currency of the Member State where the payment service provider of the payment service user is located. This measure will extend the benefits of cheap cross-border euro transfers to an additional 150 million non-euro area consumers, and a potential extra 2,5 billion transactions per year.

In addition, the agreed text increases the transparency requirements relating

to the charges for currency conversion services. When consumers make card payments or withdraw cash abroad, they can often choose whether to pay in the local currency or their home currency. According to the new rules, consumers will be informed of applicable charges before making their choice. This will be achieved by introducing an obligation to disclose the charges applied as a percentage mark-up of all currency conversion charges over the latest available exchange rate of the ECB. This new level of transparency is intended to raise consumers' awareness, thereby enhancing competition between different currency conversion services providers.

Next steps

The text will now undergo a legal linguistic revision. Parliament and Council will then be called on to adopt the proposed regulation at first reading.

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[Visa Information System: Council agrees negotiating mandate to strengthen the system](#)

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In response to changing migration and security challenges, the EU is improving its Visa Information System (VIS), a tool used by authorities to register and check persons applying for a visa to enter the Schengen area.

EU ambassadors today agreed the Council's negotiating position on a proposal to amend the Visa Information System (VIS) regulation. On the basis of this mandate, the Council Presidency will start negotiations with the European Parliament once the latter has adopted its position.

We have a duty to ensure that those coming into the European Union do not pose a threat to our citizens and are not using false pretences to get round existing migration rules. The new VIS rules will help improve security, especially via the registration of long-stay visa and residence permit applications in the system.

The main aims of the amending regulation are to:

- further strengthen the security of the short-stay visa procedure
- include long-stay visas and residence permits in the database
- ensure interoperability between the VIS and other relevant EU systems and databases

Information in the VIS

Under the proposed new rules, the VIS will not only include information on short-stay visas but also on long-stay visas and residence permits, as these documents allow for free movement within the Schengen area. Registering these documents in a centralised database will help the authorities to verify their authenticity and validity.

In addition, a digital copy of the biodata page of the travel document would be included in the VIS. This would also facilitate the return of illegally staying third country nationals whose data may be stored in the VIS since, even if their travel document is not available at the time of return, a copy of it may be recognised by third countries as proof of nationality.

Moreover, the list of recognised travel documents which entitle the holder to cross the external border would be integrated in the VIS, in order to allow for automatic verification of whether the applicant's travel document is recognised for this purpose.

Checks and access

Before issuing a visa or residence permit, the new rules would allow authorities to check the personal data provided against relevant security and migration databases, for example Eurodac, the Entry-Exit System and Interpol's stolen and lost travel documents database. The consultation of these databases would be automatically launched by the VIS, while any hits resulting from the check would be manually assessed by the responsible authority, who will decide on the appropriate follow-up.

The access of Europol and law enforcement authorities to VIS data, currently regulated under a 2008 Council decision, would also be integrated into the VIS regulation. Access to VIS data can allow law enforcement authorities to identify victims of crime or make progress in their investigations.

In order to fulfil their obligations under Schengen rules, international carriers should also be able to verify whether or not third country nationals who are required to be in possession of a valid visa or residence permit have one. This would not entitle them to access the VIS as such, they would simply refer a yes/no answer on the existence of a valid visa or residence permit.

Background

The Visa Information System, which has been operational since 2011, is a database to facilitate the short-stay visa procedure. It helps visa, border, asylum and migration authorities check third-country nationals who need a visa to travel to the Schengen area. It connects member states' consulates around the world, as well as all external border crossing points.

An overall evaluation of the VIS was carried out in 2016 by the European Commission. It concluded that the system meets its objectives, but that new challenges in visa, border and migration management require further development in a number of areas. On 16 May 2018, the Commission submitted a proposal amending the VIS regulation.

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[Green finance: Council agrees position on low carbon benchmarks and disclosure requirements](#)

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The Council is taking steps to encourage financial companies to be more aware of the impact of their investments on the environment.

EU ambassadors today endorsed the Council's position on two proposals aiming at making finance greener and more in line with the objectives of the Paris agreement on climate change:

- a proposal introducing **disclosure obligations** on how financial companies integrate environmental, social and governance factors in their investment decisions;
- a proposal creating a **new category of financial benchmarks** aimed at giving greater information on an investment portfolio's carbon footprint.

The EU is fully committed to achieving the targets set by the Paris

agreement. Cutting greenhouse gas emissions requires investment. It is crucial that capital markets pay their fair share in channelling funding towards projects and companies that contribute to making our economy more sustainable.

Hartwig Löger, minister for finance of Austria, which currently holds the Council presidency

Investors' duties and disclosure

Institutional investors, such as asset managers, pension funds or insurance companies, receive a mandate from their clients and beneficiaries to make investment decisions on their behalf.

Although these companies have to comply with strict legal requirements to ensure that they act in the best interest of their clients, rules on duties and information as regards the environmental and social impact of their investment decisions have not yet been defined.

The draft text proposes a **harmonised EU approach to the integration of sustainability risks and opportunities into the procedures of institutional investors.**

It requires them to disclose:

- the **procedures they have in place** to integrate environmental and social risks into their investment and advisory process;
- the **extent to which those risks might have an impact on the profitability** of the investment;
- where institutional investors claim to be pursuing a "green" investment strategy, information on how this strategy is implemented and the **sustainability or climate impact of their products and portfolios.**

The proposed regulation should in practice **limit possible "greenwashing"** – i.e. the risk that products and services which are marketed as sustainable or climate friendly in reality do not meet the sustainability/climate objectives claimed to be pursued.

Low-carbon benchmarks

An increasing number of investors seek to ensure that their investments have a positive impact on the environment. To do so, they take investment decisions based on the **carbon footprint generated by the projects or assets** they consider, using indices that reference or measure the performance of investment portfolios. However, a wide variety of such indices currently exists, with different objectives and degrees of quality and integrity.

The Council therefore supports the Commission's proposal to provide a reliable tool to pursue low-carbon investment strategies by establishing a new category, comprising two types of financial benchmarks:

- **low-carbon benchmarks**, which aim to lower the carbon footprint of a standard investment portfolio.
- **positive-carbon impact benchmarks**, which have the more ambitious goal to select only components that contribute to attaining the 2°C set out in the Paris climate agreement.

Next steps

The Parliament voted on its position on disclosure on 9 November. Negotiations between the Council and the Parliament are therefore ready to start.

The Parliament's position on low-carbon benchmarks is still pending.

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[Single-use plastics: Commission welcomes ambitious agreement on new rules to reduce marine litter](#)

The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union have reached a provisional political agreement on the ambitious new measures proposed by the Commission to tackle marine litter at its source, targeting the 10 plastic products most often found on our beaches as well as abandoned fishing gear.

Today's agreement is based on the [Single-use plastics proposal](#) presented in May by the Commission as part of the world's first comprehensive [Plastics Strategy](#), adopted earlier this year, to protect citizens and the environment from plastic pollution whilst fostering growth and innovation. The new rules contribute to a broader effort of turning Europe into a more sustainable, circular economy, reflected in the [Circular Economy Action Plan](#) adopted in December 2015. They will place Europe's businesses and consumers ahead as a world leader in producing and using sustainable alternatives that avoid marine litter and oceans pollution, tackling a problem with global implications.

First Vice-President Frans **Timmermans**, responsible for sustainable development said: *"I warmly welcome today's ambitious agreement reached on our Commission proposal to reduce single use plastics. This agreement truly helps protect our people and our planet. Europeans are conscious that plastic waste is an enormous problem and the EU as a whole has shown true courage in addressing it, making us the global leader in tackling plastic marine litter. Equally important is, that with the solutions agreed upon today, we are also driving a new circular business model and showing the way forward to putting*

our economy on a more sustainable path.”

Vice-President Jyrki **Katainen**, responsible for jobs, growth, investment and competitiveness, added: *“Tackling the plastics problem is a must. At the same time it brings new opportunities for innovation, competitiveness and job creation. We will discuss those thoroughly with industry within the Circular Plastics Alliance. With the agreement reached today we are showing that Europe is doing a smart economic and environmental choice and is advancing towards a new truly circular plastics economy.”*

Commissioner for environment, maritime affairs and fisheries, Karmenu **Vella** said: *“When we have a situation where one year you can bring your fish home in a plastic bag, and the next year you are bringing that bag home in a fish, we have to work hard and work fast. So I am happy that with the agreement of today between Parliament and Council. We have taken a big stride towards reducing the amount of single-use plastic items in our economy, our ocean and ultimately our bodies.”*

Different measures for different products

The new EU directive on Single-Use Plastics will be the most ambitious legal instrument at global level addressing marine litter. It envisages different measures to apply to different product categories. Where alternatives are easily available and affordable, single-use plastic products will be banned from the market, such as plastic cotton buds, cutlery, plates, straws, drink stirrers, sticks for balloons, products made of oxo-degradable plastic and food and beverage containers made of expanded polystyrene. For other products, the focus is on limiting their use through a national reduction in consumption; on design and labelling requirements; and waste management/clean-up obligations for producers.

Next Steps

The provisional agreement reached today must now be formally approved by the European Parliament and the Council. Following its approval, the new Directive will be published in the EU’s Official Journal and the Member States will have to transpose it after two years.

Background

This initiative delivers on the commitment made in the [European Plastics Strategy](#) to tackle wasteful and damaging plastic litter through legislative action. The measures proposed will contribute to Europe’s transition towards a Circular Economy, and to reaching the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the EU’s climate commitments and industrial policy objectives.

In December 2015 the Juncker Commission adopted an ambitious new [Circular Economy Package](#) to help European businesses and consumers to make the transition to a stronger and more circular economy where resources are used in a more sustainable way. The Package has broken down silos in the Commission and contributes to broad political priorities by tackling climate

change and the environment while boosting job creation, economic growth, investment and social fairness. It has been prepared by a core project team co-chaired by First Vice-President Frans **Timmermans** and Vice-President Jyrki **Katainen** with the close involvement of Commissioners Karmenu **Vella** and Elżbieta **Bieńkowska**. Many other Commissioners were also involved in its preparation and helped identify the most effective tools covering a wide range of policy areas.

The proposed Directive follows a similar approach to the successful 2015 Plastic Bags Directive, which brought about a rapid shift in consumer behaviour. The new measures will bring about both environmental and economic benefits, such as for example:

- avoid the emission of 3.4 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent;
- avoid environmental damages which would cost the equivalent of €22 billion by 2030;
- save consumers a projected €6.5 billion.

The Single-use plastics directive is complemented by other measures taken against marine pollution, such as the [Directive on port reception facilities](#), on which the European Parliament and the Council just reached a provisional agreement last week. The Directive tackles waste from ships, with a focus on sea-based marine litter. It sets measures to ensure that waste generated on ships or collected at sea is always returned to land, recycled and processed in ports.

Earlier this month the European Commission launched also the “[Circular Plastics Alliance](#)” an alliance of key industry stakeholders covering the full plastics value chain as part of its persisting efforts to reduce plastics littering, increase the share of recycled plastics and stimulate market innovation. The Alliance aims to improve the economics and quality of plastics recycling in Europe, and will in particular strengthen the match between supply and demand for recycled plastics which is identified as the main obstacle to a well-functioning EU market of recycled plastics.

For More Information

[Single-use plastics proposal](#)

[Questions and Answers: New EU rules on single-use plastics](#)

[Plastics Strategy factsheets](#)

[European Plastics Strategy](#)

[Circular Economy Package](#)

[Commission launches Circular Plastics Alliance](#)

[‘Be Ready to Change’ Campaign](#)

Single-use plastics: Presidency reaches provisional agreement with Parliament

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The EU is fighting marine plastic pollution

The EU is taking action to reduce plastic pollution by setting tough new restrictions on certain single-use plastic products. The presidency of the Council today reached a provisional agreement with the European Parliament on a new directive which is part of the EU's efforts to protect the environment and reduce marine litter.

The single-use plastics directive builds on the EU's existing waste legislation but goes further by setting even stricter rules for those types of products and packaging which are among the top ten most frequently found items polluting European beaches. The new rules will ban the use of certain throwaway plastic products for which alternatives exist. In addition, specific measures will be introduced to reduce the use of the most frequently littered plastic products.

Marine litter is a growing global problem. We have all heard the warning by the World Economic Forum and others that, measured by weight, there will be more plastic than fish in the world's oceans by 2050 if we continue dumping plastic in the sea at the present rate. We cannot let this happen. This is why the EU takes action to restrict the use of certain throwaway plastic products for which good plastic-free alternatives exist. And we will make plastic producers pay for cleaning up.

Elisabeth Köstinger, Austrian federal minister of sustainability and tourism

Single-use plastic products are made wholly or partly of plastic and are typically intended to be used just once or for a short period of time before they are thrown away. The design of plastic products should always take into account the reusability and recyclability of the product.

One of the main purposes of this directive is to reduce the amount of plastic

waste which we create. Where possible, the measures laid down in this directive and their implementation should give priority to waste prevention or to the transition to re-usable products rather than to other single-use alternatives.

The following products will be banned in the EU:

- Plastic cutlery (forks, knives, spoons and chopsticks)
- Plastic plates
- Plastic straws
- Food containers made of expanded polystyrene, such as fast food boxes, with or without a cover, used to contain food that is intended for immediate consumption either on-the-spot or take-away, and that is ready to be consumed without any further preparation, like cooking, boiling or heating
- Beverage containers made of expanded polystyrene
- Cups for beverages made of expanded polystyrene
- Products made from oxo-degradable plastic: this term refers to plastic materials which contain additives that promote oxidation of that plastic into micro fragments under aerobic conditions. This type of plastic contributes to microplastic pollution in the environment, is not compostable and negatively affects the recycling of conventional plastic.
- Cotton bud sticks made of plastic

In addition, member states will take the necessary measures to achieve a measurable quantitative reduction in the consumption of the following products:

- Food containers made of plastic, such as fast food boxes, with or without a cover, used to contain food that is intended for immediate consumption either on-the-spot or take-away, and that is ready to be consumed without any further preparation, like cooking, boiling or heating.
- Plastic cups for beverages, including their covers and lids

There will be a binding target of at least 25% of recycled plastic for PET beverage bottles from 2025 onwards, calculated as an average for the member state. In 2030 all plastic bottles will have to respect a target of at least 30% of recycled content.

Wet wipes, i.e. pre-wetted personal care and domestic wipes, will need to bear a marking on their packaging which informs consumers of the presence of plastic in the wet wipe and of the harm done to the environment if it is thrown away elsewhere than in the bin.

Producers of tobacco filters which contain plastic will be subject to an extended producer responsibility scheme. This means that producers will have to cover the costs for public collection systems for cigarette stubs, including the necessary infrastructure such as appropriate waste receptacles in common litter hotspots.

Tobacco product filters containing plastic are the second most littered single-use plastic items in the EU. Innovation and product development are expected to provide viable alternatives to filters containing plastic, and the co-legislators agree that this development needs to be accelerated. Cigarettes and other tobacco products which have filters that contain plastic will need to bear a marking on their packaging which informs consumers of the presence of plastic and of the harm done to the environment if the cigarette stubs are thrown away elsewhere than in the bin.

Background and next steps

The proposal under discussion is part of the EU's plastics strategy. The European Commission has presented this draft directive in late May 2018. Environment ministers discussed the proposal at their meetings on 25 June and on 9 October. The Council reached its position on 31 October and began trilogue negotiations with the European Parliament on 6 November which ended in a provisional agreement today.

If this agreement is confirmed by EU ambassadors of member states, the directive can be submitted for approval to the European Parliament and then back to the Council for final adoption.

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