

Press release – Croatian Presidency outlines priorities to EP committees



Croatia holds the Presidency of the Council until July 2020. The first series of hearings took place on 20, 21 and 22 January. A second set of hearings is taking place in the following week. This press release will be updated regularly.

Hearings held on 20, 21 and 22 January

Environment and Public Health

On Monday, Health Minister Milan Kujundžić told the Environment and Public Health Committee that organ donation and transplantation, ageing and cancer are among the priorities. MEPs quizzed the Minister on a variety of issues, including food labelled according to nutrients, obesity, endocrine disruptors, euthanasia and medicine shortages. On Tuesday, Environment and Energy Minister Tomislav Čorić said that priorities include the transition to climate neutrality by 2050 and protecting biodiversity. Emission reduction goals for 2030 and the climate law, funding, air and water quality and aviation emission reductions were some of the issues raised by MEPs.

Finally, still on Tuesday, Agriculture Minister Marija Vučković stressed agriculture's role in preserving the environment as well as issues such as food safety, plant health, pesticide reductions and animal welfare. MEPs questioned the Minister on subjects such as the CAP reform, forestry practices, animal feed and sustainable food systems.

Fisheries

On Tuesday, Agriculture Minister Marija Vučković told the Fisheries Committee that the link between stable fish stocks and sustainable fisheries would guide the Presidency's approach. She confirmed they would focus on advancing

the negotiations on the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF). The Presidency will also aim to reach a general approach on fisheries control. Other issues on the agenda include aquaculture and scientific research, as well as post-Brexit preparations to ensure fair access to waters for both the EU and the UK.

International Trade

In the Trade Committee on Tuesday, MEPs asked Foreign and European Affairs Minister Gordan Grlić-Radman how the presidency plans to tackle the growing discord over the future conclusion of a free trade agreement between the EU and the Mercosur countries. They also wanted to know about the timely issue of WTO reform and how to include enforceable Green Deal principles in trade policy. Finally, they called for bilateral trade relations with Taiwan to be established, a trade strand to be added to the Africa policy, and for labour dignity to be ensured with trade partners.

Transport and tourism

The Presidency will start a debate on boosting the competitiveness and sustainability of the shipping sector and work on the Trans-European Transport Network and Connecting Europe Facility, State Secretary of the Ministry of Sea, Transport and Infrastructure Josep Bilaver told the Transport and Tourism Committee on Tuesday. On land transport, rail passenger rights will be one of the priorities as well as the Eurovignette proposal. On tourism, the Presidency will advocate for sustainable tourism and encourage the development of less developed regions and use of ICT, said State Secretary of the Ministry of Tourism Frano Matušić.

MEPs urged the Presidency to restart the discussions on air passenger rights and the Single European Sky. Some also wondered how to ensure that boosting the air transport sector will not lead to an increase in emissions. MEPs repeated calls to increase support for the tourism sector in the next EU long-term budget.

Foreign Affairs

Foreign Minister Gordan Grlić Radman said on Tuesday that they will do their best to advance enlargement as a way to invest in the stability and prosperity of Europe. Pointing to the Western Balkans, he told MEPs that the EU should not allow any European region to drift away. Croatia also intends to work on bringing the Eastern European partners closer and finding a comprehensive solution to the crisis in Ukraine, he said.

Regarding instability in southern neighbourhood and Middle East, he stressed it is important to combine efforts with international partners and engage on de-escalating tensions, adding that emphasis should be placed on addressing migration and countering terrorism.

Regional Development

On Tuesday, Regional Development and EU Funds Minister Marko Pavić said that the three main files currently under inter-institutional negotiations (Common

Provisions Regulation, European Regional Development Fund/Cohesion Fund, and Interreg) will be their priority, and that he was confident in their timely adoption. The presidency also started to examine the proposal for the Just Transition Fund and progress is expected shortly.

Regional Development Committee members urged the Presidency to ensure that their updated budgetary proposals do not sacrifice cohesion funding and that swift progress is made on all matters.

Culture, education, youth and sport

In the field of education, Science and Education Minister Blaženka Divjak on Tuesday told the Culture and Education Committee that the Presidency will focus on: more investments to enhance the role of education in the European semester; a balanced mobility and brain circulation; better professional training for teachers, and a new post-2020 strategic framework for education and training. Youth in rural and remote areas will also be a priority, Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy Minister Vesna Bedeković added.

Deputy State Secretary for Sport Krešimir Šamija said that developing human potential in the field of sports, through new professional skills and competences for trainers and coaches, will be the priority. Supporting mobility in the cultural and creative sectors is also among their main objectives, Culture Minister Nina Obuljen Koržinek said, on Tuesday.

Internal market and consumer protection

Measures to support digitalisation, eliminate unjustified barriers in the single market and ensure consumer protection were among the issues discussed with Economy, Entrepreneurship and Crafts Minister Darko Horvat, in the Internal Market and Consumer Protection Committee on Wednesday.

MEPs asked the Presidency to be “ambitious” in tackling dual quality of products, advance its work on the free movement of services and ensure a better implementation of single market rules. Plans on artificial intelligence (AI) and on the circular economy, e.g. to prolong the shelf life of products, were also addressed. “The EU has all it takes to become a leader on artificial intelligence, on its own way and based on its own values”, said the Minister.

Agriculture and Rural Development

The Presidency will move towards an “ambitious budget” in which the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) “remains a priority” Farm Minister Marija Vučković told Agriculture Committee on Wednesday. The Presidency will push for the CAP to be simplified even further and reformed in a more sustainable way. It will also focus on the ‘Farm to fork’ strategy and new EU forest strategy for after 2020.

Ensuring that enough funds are available for EU farmers is imperative, MEPs said, many of them stressing that farmers should also be reimbursed for new climate-related measures. Some speakers stressed that EU food security should remain the prime focus of the CAP, whilst others spoke against its re-

nationalisation or demanded more ambitious climate actions.

Economic and Monetary Affairs

ECOFIN Chair Zdravko Marić at the Economic and Monetary Affairs Committee on Wednesday flagged the review of the economic governance rules, completing the banking union, making progress on setting up a capital markets union and finalising the Council's position on the reform and investment support programme as the Presidency's main objectives. He also mentioned taxation, non-performing loans, and mitigating negative fiscal consequences from current demographic trends as other areas of work.

Various MEPs asked questions on the economic governance framework, the budgetary instrument envisaged to help member states carry out structural reforms, financial supervision architecture and bank resolution. They also sought for more detail on taxation and anti-money laundering.

Women's Rights and Gender Equality

On Wednesday, Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy Minister Vesna Bedeković, told Women's Rights and Gender Equality MEPs that the main priority in terms of gender equality is to identify the obstacles women face on the labour market and increase their rate of activity. 'Stronger economic independence for women is key for economic growth', she said. The Minister also declared she would work to reduce the gender pay and pension gaps.

MEPs quizzed the Minister on a number of additional issues such as the attacks on sexual and reproductive rights in some EU countries, the ratification of the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women (only 21 EU countries have ratified it) and the Women on boards Directive, which is blocked in the Council.

Employment and Social Affairs

Labour and Pension System Minister Josip Aladrović and Social Policy Minister Vesna Bedeković outlined on Wednesday to the Employment and Social Affairs Committee their priorities for the next six months. These include delivering on the European Pillar of Social Rights as well as promoting work-life balance, gender equality and increased participation of women in the labour market. The implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) will be also high on the agenda.

MEPs quizzed the ministers on youth unemployment and the future of the youth guarantee, and the role of social partners in setting up an EU minimum wage. They expressed concerns about the funding of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the future Child Guarantee, announced for 2021. Several MEPs finally quizzed the ministers on the negotiations on the future EU long-term budget, opposing possible transfers from cohesion funds to the Just Transition Fund.

Budgets

Budgets Committee MEPs made clear to Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance Zdravko Marić that their most pressing issue is getting an agreement on the next EU long-term budget (multiannual financial framework, or MFF), still under discussion in the Council, while Parliament has been ready to negotiate since 2018. They reminded the Minister of the EP's position and reiterated that they insist on a reform of the EU's Own Resources (revenue).

Mr Marić replied that the Croatian Presidency's role regarding the MFF is limited, since EUCO President Charles Michel is now in the lead. Other issues discussed were the annual EU budget for 2021 – Council will present its guidelines in spring –, and the InvestEU and Reform Support Programmes.

Industry, Research, Energy

Environment and Energy Minister Tomislav Čorić told the Industry, Research and Energy Committee on Wednesday that the Presidency will support policies that strengthen infrastructure and connectivity, in particular through the Energy Union, and seek further integration in the energy market, boosting energy security through infrastructure and diversification. State Secretary and Sea, Transport and Infrastructure Minister Josip Bilaver pledged to start a discussion on artificial intelligence and 5G, with a focus on security.

Economy, Entrepreneurship and Crafts Minister Darko Horvat said that a long-term industrial policy strategy and strengthening the competitiveness of SMEs will be prioritised. On artificial intelligence, he highlighted that batteries need to be produced in a competitive and sustainable way in Europe. Finally, Science and Education Minister Blaženka Divjak said that they would seek to facilitate 'brain' circulation in the EU, as countries with less research and development are experiencing a brain drain.

Hearings held on 27 and 28 January

Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs

Interior Minister Davor Božinović on Monday said the Presidency would support the Commission once new proposals on asylum and migration policy are tabled. Many MEPs of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs asked the Minister about alleged violence and pushbacks by Croatian police against asylum-seekers and migrants at the Croatian border with Bosnia. Mr Božinović defended the modus operandi of the Croatian police and insisted they always respect national and European law.

Justice Minister Dražen Bošnjaković told the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs that finishing work on the electronic evidence regulation is one of the Presidency's priorities, emphasising how crucial this instrument is for cross-border cooperation in criminal proceedings. Furthermore, Mr Bošnjaković highlighted the importance of a cross-border judicial training network. In the following debate, several MEPs asked Minister Bošnjaković to clarify how the Presidency aims to proceed regarding the Article 7 procedures against Hungary and Poland.

Legal Affairs

The Presidency will draft the future strategic guidelines on freedom, security and justice based on four key elements: values and rule of law, mutual trust, protection of the common European area and new technologies, Justice Minister Dražen Bošnjaković told the Legal Affairs Committee on Tuesday. In the field of civil law, the Presidency aims to reach an agreement on regulations on the service of documents and taking of evidence. Combatting all forms of violence against women, developing the e-Justice system, using modern technologies and Artificial Intelligence in the judiciary are also high on the agenda.

MEPs quizzed Mr. Bošnjaković on the future of several blocked files in the Council, e.g. comitology, gender balance on boards, country-by-country reporting by multinationals, the funding of EU long-term budget programmes and the EU mechanism on rule of law.