

# Press release – Portuguese Presidency outlines priorities to EP committees



Portugal holds the Presidency of the Council until the end of June 2021. The first set of hearings takes place between 25 and 28 January. A second set of hearings will take place the following week. This press release will be updated regularly.

## **Foreign Affairs**

On 26 January, **Foreign Affairs Minister Augusto Santos Silva** outlined a range of external action priorities to the Foreign Affairs Committee. He spoke of the importance of reviving the transatlantic dialogue between the EU and the new Biden administration, promoting stronger ties between the EU and the Asia-Pacific region, notably India, as well as intensifying EU cooperation with Africa and the African Union, for example when it comes to finalising a new Post-Cotonou Partnership Agreement.

MEPs quizzed the minister on several topics, such as the EU's strategy vis-à-vis China, the Presidency's approach to Russia, and migration issues. They welcomed the initiative to hold the EU-India summit in Porto this year as well as Portugal's readiness to further engage in enlargement efforts. MEPs also questioned Mr Santos Silva on how the EU will guarantee respect for social, environmental and human rights in its commercial policy with third countries.

## **Fisheries**

On 26 January, **Maritime Affairs Minister Ricardo Serrão Santos** told the Fisheries Committee that the Presidency is committed to advancing negotiations on quotas with the UK and reaching a deal on this with Norway.

MEPs complained about the uncertainty around fishing conditions following Brexit and how the Brexit Reserve Adjustment is to be distributed among countries.

They also highlighted the importance of concluding the regulation on the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, obtaining a general agreement on the new Fisheries Control, and concluding fishing deals with third countries, like Mauritania, Guinea-Conakry and Madagascar. Serrão Santos assured them that these are all priorities for the Portuguese Presidency.

## **Transport and Tourism**

On 26 January, **Infrastructure and Housing Minister Pedro Nuno Santos** and **Secretary of State for Tourism Rita Marques** stressed that tourism and transport are two of the sectors hit hardest by the pandemic, which will also recover last from this crisis. Therefore, the Presidency will strive to contribute to a swift recovery and transformation of the transport sector, to make it more resilient, greener and smarter. The focus will then turn to the railway sector, implementing a new EU mobility strategy and further work on Single European Sky and Eurovignette draft rules.

Transport Committee MEPs welcomed the Presidency's focus on sustainable mobility, rail and their attempt to support, in particular, passengers as well as companies working in the transport and tourism sectors. They urged the Presidency to advance further on the Connecting Europe Facility, air passenger rights and alternative aviation fuels draft rules.

## **Culture and Education**

**Culture Minister Graça Fonseca** told the Culture and Education Committee on 26 January that supporting the recovery of the cultural and creative sectors is a priority, as is strengthening social security for artists, authors and other workers. MEPs called on the minister to earmark at least 2% of the recovery funds for cultural and creative sectors, and to make it binding for all member states to invest in the social protection of workers.

**Education Minister Tiago Brandão Rodrigues** and **Science, Technology and Higher Education Minister Manuel Heitor** stressed their commitment to reducing inequalities in access to education, as well as on re-training and up-skilling of professionals of all ages. MEPs noted that young people find it hard to enter the labour market, and asked for the European Youth guarantee to be strengthened.

## **Agriculture and Rural Development**

Concluding the talks on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform is one of the Presidency's top priorities, **Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development**

**Minister Maria do Céu Antunes** told the Agriculture Committee on 26 January. An agreement should be reached in April, the Minister said. The Presidency will focus on promoting structural development within the food system, sustainability in rural areas, digital growth and supporting organic farming. Other priorities include the Farm to Fork strategy and fostering more sustainable and biodiverse agriculture.

Negotiations on the CAP reform should be finalised as quickly as possible, but not at any cost, MEPs said. They called on member states to come closer to Parliament's position, which is more ambitious than the Council's, and stressed that the future CAP must be greener, ensure a level playing field and a fair income for EU farmers, and guarantee food security for EU citizens.

### **Women's Rights and Gender Equality**

On 26 January, **Mariana Vieira Da Silva, Minister of State for the Presidency** reminded the **Women's Rights and Gender Equality** Committee that women are particularly affected by the COVID-19 crisis. They are on the front line in combatting the pandemic, are hit harder by the economic crisis and are facing an increase in domestic violence during periods of confinement. The Presidency will organise a conference on violence against women and aims to create an EU-wide single hotline to report domestic violence, she announced.

The Minister also said that they will work on reaching a consensus on the Women on Boards Directive, blocked for years in the Council. In addition to this legislation, MEPs called for the Anti-discrimination Directive, which has been in a deadlock for 12 years, to be unblocked. Some MEPs expressed concern that certain EU countries are moving away from democracy and not upholding respect for gender equality. They called on the Presidency to highlight the strong link between the rule of law mechanism and respect for gender equality.

### **Environment, Public Health and Food Security**

On 25 January, **Environment and Climate Action Minister João Pedro Matos Fernandes** told the Environment, Public Health and Food Security Committee that Portugal will promote the EU as a leader in Climate Action. The presidency is prioritising a green recovery and getting a deal on the EU Climate Law. MEPs raised questions on issues such as the EU Climate Law, biodiversity, the CAP reform, hydrogen, CO2 emissions from shipping and the need for a green industrial strategy and green investments. They also stressed the importance of the upcoming UN climate change conference in Glasgow.

On 26 January, **Agriculture Minister Maria do Céu Antunes** emphasised the need for a green and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, which includes a follow-up on the Farm to Fork strategy. Council conclusions in spring 2021 will shape the EU's position for the COP26 in Glasgow. MEPs quizzed the Minister on a number of topics including biodiversity, desertification, food

waste, animal welfare, the reduction of pesticides and biological control agents.

## **Legal Affairs**

On 27 January, the Legal Affairs Committee held a debate with **Justice Minister Francisca Van Dunem**, in which digitalisation and access to legal recourse, the protection of vulnerable adults, environmental crimes, the fight against illegal and online hate speech, and women and children's rights figured prominently. MEPs underlined the importance of tackling the negative impact of COVID-19 on the justice sector. To increase citizens' trust in EU justice systems, member states should provide support, and systems and proceedings should be simplified and made more inclusive and comprehensible, explained Van Dunem.

Members asked about the Presidency's position on the Digital Services and Digital Markets Acts, particularly in relation to removing illegal or harmful content while respecting fundamental rights. In response to questions from MEPs regarding the state of play of the Non-Financial Reporting and Women on Boards directives, as well as public country-by-country reporting files, the Minister expressed hope for progress in these areas.

## **Constitutional Affairs**

On 28 January, the Constitutional Affairs Committee met with **Secretary of State for European Affairs Ana Paula Zacarias** and stressed the need to quickly finalise the joint declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe. They also asked the Presidency to commit to the prospect of treaty changes. Ms Zacarias reiterated the Presidency's intention to make progress on the reform of the Ombudsman Statute, Parliament's rights of inquiry and initiative, and the accession of the EU to the European Convention on Human Rights.

MEPs welcomed the Presidency's commitment to protecting EU values and asked Ms Zacarias for more information on ongoing Article 7 procedures and the new mechanism to protect the EU budget. They also raised the creation of an independent EU ethics body, the rules on financing European political parties and foundations, Parliament's role in the governance of the agreement with the UK, and transparency concerns regarding the Council's activities.

## **Security and Defence**

On 28 January, **National Defence Minister João Gomes Cravinho** told the Subcommittee on Security and Defence that the Presidency will continue promoting EU strategic autonomy and work on developing the common European Strategic Compass. It will pay particular attention to EU relations with Africa, maritime security in key areas such as the Gulf of Guinea and the Atlantic, transatlantic relations, military mobility and cyber defence. Other priorities include activating the European Defence Fund (EDF), he said.

MEPs questioned the Minister on several topics, such as the European Peace Facility (EPF), Russia and China's hostile activities, the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean and issues with Turkey, as well as relations with the UK.

## **International Trade**

Following **Foreign Affairs Minister Augusto Santos Silva's** presentation in the International Trade committee, most MEPs were concerned that ongoing talks with Mercosur countries must include further reassurances on environmental, labour and social standards. MEPs reiterated that the deal in its current form is unacceptable for Parliament, due to continued concerns about deforestation, biodiversity loss and human rights.

MEPs welcomed the Presidency's intention to revive talks on an EU-India investment agreement, but emphasised that including clauses on environmental, labour and social obligations is vital. Likewise, most MEPs underlined that China must commit to ending forced labour in light of the EU-China investment agreement. They also asked the Presidency about its plans to unblock talks on the international procurement instrument, a helpful tool to ensure a level playing field in EU-China relations.

## **Internal Market and Consumer Protection**

In the Internal Market and Consumer Protection Committee on 28 January, **Economy and Digital Transition Minister Pedro Siza Vieira** stressed that the Presidency will focus on the EU making a resilient and fair recovery from the pandemic. They will do this by making as much progress as possible on Next Generation EU, as well as approving and executing national recovery plans. He emphasised the impact that recovery plans will have on both digital and green transitions, including increased EU strategic autonomy and a diversification of production.

As the single market plays an important role in all these areas, the Presidency aims to reduce regulatory barriers and fragmentation, especially to services. It will focus on improving the single market for SMEs. With regard to digital goods and services, the Minister stressed the importance of improving digital skills and digitising public administration (including electronic ID), as well as the Digital Services Act.