



Oireachtas Digest on Europe

Week : 25 to 31 March 2024 | Ref: 12-24



Seirbhís Thithe
an Oireachtais
Houses of the
Oireachtas Service

European Parliament Coming Week Highlights External parliamentary activities

No parliamentary meetings are scheduled in Brussels, as the week is set aside for external parliamentary activities.

European Commission Coming Week Highlights

Wednesday	College Meeting
Thursday	Mr Janez Lenarčič in Dublin: meets Mr Micheál Martin Tánaiste, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Defence; meets Mr Darragh O'Brien, Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage; meets high level stakeholders from Irish humanitarian NGOs; participates in the public launch of the report on the findings of the project Futureproof-IE, funded by the Union Civil Protection Mechanism.

European Council and Council of the European Union Coming Week Highlights

24-25 March	Informal meeting of fisheries ministers
25 March	Environment Council Agenda: Waste framework directive; Reducing microplastic pollution; 2040 climate target
26 March	Agriculture and Fisheries Council Agenda: Rapid and structural responses to the current situation in the agricultural sector: follow-up; Market situation, in particular following the invasion of Ukraine



Highlights Week 18 to 24 March 2024

European Parliament.

Highlights Week 18 to 24 March 2024

Platform Work: first green light to new EU rules on employment status

On Tuesday, the Employment and Social Affairs Committee endorsed a political deal on a new bill aiming to improve the working conditions of platform workers.

The new rules, agreed on by the Parliament and the Council in February, aim to ensure that platform workers have their employment status classified correctly and to correct bogus self-employment. They also regulate, for the first time ever in the EU, the use of algorithmic management and artificial intelligence in the workplace.

The provisional agreement on the Platform Work Directive was adopted by the Employment and Social Affairs Committee with 37 votes in favour and 3 against.

Next steps

The agreed text will now have to be formally endorsed by the Parliament during the 22-25 April plenary session. It then also needs to be formally adopted by the Council. After its publication in the Official Journal of the EU, member states will have two years to incorporate the provisions of the directive into their national legislation.

Link to EP report [here](#)

First green light to new bill on firms' impact on human rights and environment

On Tuesday, the Legal Affairs Committee approved a bill, agreed with EU governments, requiring firms to mitigate their negative impact on human rights and the environment.

MEPs on the Legal Affairs Committee adopted with 20 votes for, 4 against and no abstentions new, so-called "due diligence" rules, obliging firms to alleviate the adverse impact their activities have on human rights and the environment, including slavery, child labour, labour exploitation, biodiversity loss, pollution and destruction of natural heritage. The requirement to prevent, end or mitigate their negative effects also concerns companies' upstream partners working in design, manufacture, transport and supply, and downstream partners, including those dealing with distribution, transport and storage.

Next steps

Once formally approved by the European Parliament and the member states, the directive will enter into force on the twentieth day following its publication in the EU Official Journal.

Link to EP report [here](#)

EU pharmaceutical policy: MEPs support comprehensive reform

On Tuesday, the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee adopted its position on the new directive (66 votes in favour, two against and nine abstentions) and regulation (67 votes in favour, six against and seven abstentions) covering medicinal products for human use.

Next steps



MEPs are scheduled to debate and vote on the Parliament's position during the 10-11 April 2024 plenary session. The file will be followed up by the new Parliament after the European elections on 6-9 June.

Link to EP report [here](#)

Deal to extend trade support for Ukraine with safeguards for EU farmers

On Wednesday, Parliament and Council reached a provisional agreement on extending trade liberalisation measures for Ukraine in the face of Russia's war of aggression.

Next steps

Parliament and Council will now both have to give their final green light to the provisional agreement. The current suspension expires on 5 June 2024. The new regulations should enter into force immediately following this expiration date.

Link to EP report [here](#)

European Commission.

Highlights Week 18 to 24 March 2024 .

Commission sends Statement of Objections to Kingspan for providing incorrect, incomplete and misleading information during merger investigation

The European Commission has sent a Statement of Objections to Kingspan alleging that the company provided incorrect, incomplete and misleading information during the 2021 Commission's investigation under the EU Merger Regulation ('EUMR') of Kingspan's planned acquisition of Trimo. Kingspan ultimately abandoned the transaction.

In March 2021, Kingspan notified to the Commission its plan to acquire Trimo. Both companies are producers and distributors of mineral fibre sandwich panels. In April 2021, the Commission opened an in-depth investigation into the transaction. In March 2022, it issued a Statement of Objections outlining its concerns that the proposed transaction could negatively affect competition in certain building materials markets, leading to higher prices, reduced quality or less choice for customers. In April 2022, the parties abandoned the transaction.

Link to Commission statement [here](#)

Commission takes action to improve the quality of traineeships in the EU

The European Commission is taking action and is proposing to improve working conditions for trainees, including pay, inclusiveness and quality of traineeships in the EU. The initiative consists of:

a proposal for a Directive on improving and enforcing working conditions for trainees and combatting regular employment relationships disguised as traineeships; and

a proposal to revise the 2014 Council Recommendation on a Quality Framework for Traineeships to address issues of quality and inclusiveness, such as fair pay and access to social protection.

In 2019, the latest available reliable data, there were an estimated 3.1 million trainees in the EU. Approximately half of all trainees (1.6 million) were enrolled in paid traineeships.

Link to Commission statement [here](#)

Commission prepares for pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews

The Commission has adopted a Communication on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews.

This document contributes to the ongoing discussion process about the internal reforms the EU will need to make to prepare for an enlarged Union. It looks at the implications of a larger EU in four main areas - values, policies, budget and governance - laying the ground for the pre-enlargement policy reviews announced by President von der Leyen in her 2023 State of the Union address.

Link to Commission statement [here](#)

Commission sets out actions to tackle labour and skills shortages

The Commission has presented an action plan to tackle labour and skills shortages and proposes to work together with Member States and social partners to address these issues over the coming months and years. The action plan is part of the EU's strategy to boost its competitiveness and enhance its economic and social resilience.

For almost a decade, labour and skills shortages have been increasing in all Member States. These shortages are driven by demographic shifts, the demand for new skills linked to technological developments and the twin transitions, the drive to develop further our own industrial sectors, defence and security needs, and challenges related to working conditions in some sectors and locations. The Commission has identified 42 'shortage' occupations, with some differences across the Member States.

The action plan is also a key deliverable of the European Year of Skills. It builds on the many policy and funding measures already in place at EU level, such as the Pact for Skills – which has so far provided training to 3.5 million workers –, the 2030 employment and skills targets endorsed at the Porto Social Summit, the adequate minimum wages and platform work directives, and the €65 billion in EU funds available to invest in skills.

Link to Commission statement [here](#)

Main messages from the Tripartite Social Summit

EU leaders and social partners met in Brussels for the tripartite social summit. The main theme of the summit was 'An economically and socially strong Europe to play its role in the world'.

The participants discussed the following issues:

an industrial strategy complementing the green deal with quality jobs at its heart

a single market that delivers for enterprises and workers


tackling skills and labour shortages

Link to Commission statement [here](#)

23 cities awarded with the EU Mission Label for their efforts towards climate-neutrality

The EU Mission Label was awarded to 23 cities part of the EU Mission for Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities, one of the EU Missions under Horizon Europe. The Label recognises the cities' plans to achieve climate-neutrality already by 2030 and aims to facilitate access to public and private funding towards that objective. The first ten cities had received the Label in October 2023.

The EU Mission Label was awarded by Iliana Ivanova, Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth during a ceremony with mayors and city representatives at the EU Research & Innovation Days, the biggest forum in Europe to discuss the future of science and innovation and to co-create solutions with citizens and stakeholders.



The 23 cities that received the label are: Ioannina, Kalamata, Kozani, Thessaloniki (Greece), Heidelberg (Germany), Leuven (Belgium), Espoo, Lahti, Lappeenranta, Tampere, Turku (Finland), Barcelona, Seville (Spain), Pecs (Hungary), Malmö (Sweden), Guimaraes, Lisbon (Portugal), Florence, Parma (Italy), Marseille, Lyon (France), Limassol (Cyprus) and Izmir (Türkiye).

Link to Commission statement [here](#)

Commission proposes increased tariffs on Russian and Belarusian grain products

The Commission is proposing to increase the tariffs on imports into the EU of cereals, oilseeds, and derived products ('grain products') from Russia and Belarus, including wheat, maize, and sunflower meal. These tariffs, while high enough to suppress such imports into the EU in practice, would not affect exports to third countries.

Next steps

The proposal will now be considered by the Council of the European Union. Once adopted by the Council, the tariffs will immediately be applied.

Link to Commission statement [here](#)

European Council and Council of the European Union Highlights Week 18 to 24 March 2024

Foreign Affairs Council, 18 March

Informal exchange of views with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken

Ministers held an informal exchange of views with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, via videoconference, with a focus on the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the situation in the Middle East, the approach towards China and the Indo-Pacific.

Russian war of aggression against Ukraine

The Foreign Affairs Council then discussed the Russian aggression against Ukraine, after a VTC intervention by Ukraine's Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba, who updated his EU counterparts on the latest developments on the ground and Ukraine's current priorities.

Belarus

The Foreign Affairs Council exchanged views on Belarus with a double focus on what more the EU can do to react to the human rights situation and support Belarusian civil society and democratic opposition, and Belarus' complicity in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

Situation in the Middle East

The Foreign Affairs Council then discussed the situation in the Middle East, and in particular in the Gaza strip. Ministers discussed the ever-worsening humanitarian situation in the Gaza strip, where the vast majority of the population is at risk of starvation according to a recent World Food Programme report.

Current affairs

Under current affairs, the Council exchanged views on Armenia/Azerbaijan, Niger and Haiti.

Link to Council report [here](#)

General Affairs Council, 19 March

March European Council

Ministers continued preparations for the European Council meeting on 21 and 22 March 2024 by discussing draft conclusions.

Future of Europe

Ministers exchanged views on EU internal reforms and improvements to the EU's working methods that should ensure the EU's capacity to act, including in view of EU enlargement.

European Semester

Ministers also focused on the European Semester.

They examined a synthesis report, drawn up by the Belgian presidency, on Council contributions on the 2024 European Semester. The presidency presented an updated roadmap for the 2024 European Semester, which outlines the key steps of the 2024 European Semester cycle. The Council also agreed to forward a draft recommendation on the economic policy of the euro area to the European Council for endorsement. The text will be formally adopted by the Council after endorsement by the European Council.

Link to Council report [here](#)

Tripartite Social Summit, 20 March

EU leaders and social partners met in Brussels for the Tripartite Social Summit. The main theme of the social summit was 'An economically and socially strong Europe to play its role in the world'.

The participants discussed the following issues:

an industrial strategy complementing the green deal with quality jobs at its heart

a single market that delivers for enterprises and workers

tackling skills and labour shortages

Link to Council report [here](#)

EU-Ukraine Association Council, 20 March

The ninth meeting of the EU-Ukraine Association Council took place in Brussels, and discussed political matters and bilateral relations.

During a restricted session the EU and Ukraine exchanged views on the situation following Russia's war of aggression, focusing on the military, economic and humanitarian situation on the ground and the response to Russia's war. They then touched on wider global and regional issues.

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Link to Council report [here](#)

European Council, 21-22 March

Highlights:

Over the course of a two-day summit, EU leaders adopted conclusions on Ukraine, security and defence, the Middle East, enlargement, external relations, migration, preparedness and crisis response, agriculture and the European Semester.

They also had a lunch with UN Secretary-General António Guterres to discuss the geopolitical situation and key global challenges. They celebrated the 30th anniversary of the European Economic Area (EEA) agreement with the prime ministers of Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, and took stock of preparations for the new



strategic agenda.

Support for Ukraine

Two years into Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and 10 years after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol, EU leaders stated that they were ever more steadfast in their support for Ukraine and that Russia must not prevail. The leaders stressed that the EU and its member states should accelerate and intensify the delivery of all of the necessary military assistance, including the procurement of ammunition for Ukraine, which will enable the provision of one million rounds of artillery ammunition. In this regard, they welcomed the initiative launched by Czechia to buy ammunition from non-EU countries.

Moldova and Georgia

The EU will continue to provide all relevant support for Moldova to address the challenges stemming from Russia's war against Ukraine, and to strengthen Moldova's resilience, security and stability. In this context, EU leaders welcomed member states' bilateral commitments to support the EU partnership mission in Moldova to enhance the resilience of the security sector. The EU will also continue to support Georgia in strengthening its resilience and addressing the challenges it faces as a consequence of Russia's undermining of Georgia's territorial integrity and Russia's war against Ukraine.

Security and defence

The EU is committed to increasing its overall defence readiness and capabilities to match its needs and ambition, with a strengthened technological and industrial base.

The leaders stressed the importance of accelerating implementation of the Strategic Compass. In this context, the EU rapid deployment capacity, military mobility, live exercises, enhancing space security, countering cyber and hybrid threats and addressing foreign information manipulation and interference are particularly important.

Middle East:

EU leaders discussed the latest developments in the Middle East and underlined that they were appalled by the unprecedented loss of civilian lives and the critical humanitarian situation.

The leaders:

- called for an immediate humanitarian pause leading to a sustainable ceasefire
- called for the unconditional release of all hostages and the provision of humanitarian assistance
- welcomed the Amalthea initiative opening a maritime route for emergency assistance from Cyprus to Gaza
- called for immediate measures to prevent further population displacement and provide safe shelter to the population
- urged the Israeli government to refrain from carrying out a ground operation in Rafah, where over one million Palestinians are seeking safety.

EU leaders underlined that all parties must respect international law, international humanitarian law and international human rights law. In this context, they stressed the importance of respecting and implementing the International Court of Justice's order of 26 January 2024.

The leaders also called for an immediate halt to violence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and strongly condemned extremist settler violence, stating that the perpetrators should be held accountable. In this context, they called on the Council to accelerate work on adopting sanctions.

UNRWA

EU leaders stressed that the services provided by the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in Gaza and throughout the region were indispensable and welcomed the recent financial support provided by the EU.

Regional stability

The EU will continue to work intensively with regional and international partners to prevent further regional escalation, in particular in Lebanon and the Red Sea.

Two-state solution

The EU is firmly committed to a lasting and sustainable peace based on the two-state solution.

Enlargement and reforms:

Recalling the Granada Declaration, EU leaders took stock of preparations for enlargement and internal reforms, recalling that work on both tracks needs to advance in parallel. The leaders will address internal reforms at an upcoming meeting, with the aim of adopting conclusions on a roadmap for future work by summer 2024.

Agriculture

In view of current challenges and concerns raised by farmers, EU leaders invited the Commission and the Council to continue to take forward work without delay on:

- all possible short- and medium-term measures and innovative solutions, including those to reduce the administrative burden for farmers
- strengthening farmers' position in the food supply chain
- easing farmers' financial strain by designing means of additional support
- ensuring a fair income for farmers and rules-based and fair competition
- addressing issues related to the autonomous trade measures for Ukraine in a fair and balanced way, while preparing a solution in the framework of association and trade agreements with Ukraine

Link to Council report [here](#)

Euro Summit, 22 March

Economic and financial situation

EU leaders discussed the economic and financial situation.

In view of subdued economic activity in the near term and declining inflation, the conditions for a gradual recovery are in place. In this regard, the leaders:

- underlined their determination to increase the resilience and competitiveness of the EU economy
- invited the Eurogroup to closely monitor economic and fiscal developments, including in view of the reform of the economic governance framework

Capital markets

The leaders stressed the importance of capital markets, including in terms of investments, competitiveness, innovation, sustainable growth and job creation. They are also key for mobilising financing in need for the green and digital transitions.

Taking note of the letter sent by the President of the Eurogroup on 18 March 2024, the leaders:

- invited the European Parliament and the Council to ensure rapid completion of the outstanding work on the 2020 capital markets union action plan
- called on all member states and EU institutions to swiftly implement all the measures outlined in the Eurogroup's statement on the future of the capital markets union
- requested that the Eurogroup regularly takes stock and reports on progress regarding the evolution of European capital markets

Link to Council report [here](#)

European Committee of the Regions (CoR)

Link to European Committee of the Regions Home Page [here](#)

Link to European Committee of the Regions News Page [here](#)

Inter-parliamentary meetings and conferences during the Parliamentary Dimension of the Belgian Presidency

1st Semester - 1st January - 30 June 2024

Version 21 Nov 23

Date	Meeting	Host	Location
24 - 26 March	Belgian Presidency LXXI COSAC Plenary Meeting		European Parliament
21 - 23 April 2024	Conference of the Speakers of European Union Parliaments (EUSC)	Congress of Deputies	Spain TBC
*The Belgian regional parliaments will host IPCs as part of the parliamentary dimension of the Belgian Presidency.			

Sources: Websites of: European Parliament European Commission, European Council and Council of the European Union Council, European Court of Auditors and European Ombudsman.