EUROPEAN COMMISSION

SECRETARIAT-GENERAL

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Brussels, 26 February 2020

TEXTE EN

MINUTES

of the 2324th meeting of the Commission

held in Brussels

(Berlaymont)

on Wednesday 5 February 2020

(morning)

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Single sitting: Wednesday 5 February 2020 (morning)

The sitting opened at 9.09 with Ms von der LEYEN, President, in the chair.

Present:

Ms von der LEYEN	President	
Mr TIMMERMANS	Executive Vice-President	
Ms VESTAGER	Executive Vice-President	
Mr DOMBROVSKIS	Executive Vice-President	
Mr BORRELL i FONTELLES	High Representative/ Vice-President	
Mr ŠEFČOVIČ	Vice-President	Items 1 to 9
Ms JOUROVÁ	Vice-President	Items 1 to 9 (in part)
Ms ŠUICA	Vice-President	
Mr SCHINAS	Vice-President	
Mr HAHN	Member	
Mr HOGAN	Member	Items 1 to 8 (in part)
Ms GABRIEL	Member	
Mr SCHMIT	Member	
Mr GENTILONI	Member	
Mr WOJCIECHOWSKI	Member	
Mr BRETON	Member	
Ms FERREIRA	Member	
Ms KYRIAKIDES	Member	
Mr REYNDERS	Member	
Ms DALLI	Member	
Ms JOHANSSON	Member	
Mr LENARČIČ	Member	
Ms VĂLEAN	Member	
Mr VÁRHELYI	Member	Items 1 to 10 (in part)
Ms URPILAINEN	Member	
Ms SIMSON	Member	
Mr SINKEVIČIUS	Member	

<u>The following also sat in</u>:

Mr SEIBERT	Chef de cabinet to the PRESIDENT	
Mr ROMERO REQUENA	Director-General, Legal Service	
Ms AHRENKILDE HANSEN	Director-General, DG Communication	
Mr MAMER	Head of the Spokesperson’s Service and Chief Spokesperson of the Commission	
Mr LEARDINI	Deputy Secretary-General	Items 1 to 9 (in part)
Ms RISO	Deputy Chef de cabinet to the PRESIDENT	
Ms PETKOVA	Director of Coordination and Administration in the PRESIDENT’s Office	
Mr FLOSDORFF	Adviser in the PRESIDENT’s Office	Items 1 to 10 (in part)
Ms VILA NUÑEZ	PRESIDENT’s Office	
Mr LESCRAUWAET	A member of Mr DOMBROVSKIS’s staff	Item 8
Ms SIRACUSA	Deputy Chef de cabinet to Mr HOGAN	Items 8 (in part) to 10
Mr BUTI	Chef de cabinet to Mr GENTILONI	Item 8
Mr KRISTOFFY	Chef de cabinet to Mr VÁRHELYI	Item 9
Mr HEMMELGARN	Secretariat-General	
Ms SPINANT	Commission Spokesperson’s Service	

Secretary: Ms JUHANSONE, Secretary-General, assisted by Mr AYET PUIGARNAU, Director in the Secretariat-General.

1. AGENDAS
(OJ(2020) 2324/FINAL; SEC(2020) 2324/FINAL)

The Commission took note of that day's agenda and of the tentative agendas for forthcoming meetings.

2. WEEKLY MEETING OF CHEFS DE CABINET
(RCC(2020) 2324 AND /2)

The Commission considered the Secretary-General's report on the weekly meeting of Chefs de cabinet held on Monday 3 and Wednesday 5 February 2020.

3. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES OF THE 2321ST, 2322ND AND 2323RD MEETINGS OF THE COMMISSION (14, 22 AND 29 JANUARY 2020)
(PV(2020) 2321; PV(2020) 2321, 2ND PART)

The Commission held over approval of the minutes of its 2321st, 2322nd and 2323rd meetings for a later meeting.

4. INTERINSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS
(RCC(2020) 11)

The Commission took note of the record of the meeting of the Interinstitutional Relations Group (IRG) held on Friday 31 January 2020 (RCC(2020) 11).

It paid particular attention to the following points.

4.1. HORIZONTAL ITEM

i) Agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the

European Atomic Energy Community
(point 1.2 of the IRG record)

- Information note on certain steps to be taken in the context of the conclusion and entry into force of the Agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community

The Commission took note of the information in SI(2020) 33 and /2.

4.2. LEGISLATIVE MATTERS

ii) European Parliament dossier – February 2020 part-session
(point 3.2 of the IRG record)

Ordinary legislative procedure – First reading

– European Border and Coast Guard, and repeal of Council Joint Action 98/700/JHA, of Regulation (EU) 1052/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council and of Regulation (EU) 2016/1624 of the European Parliament and of the Council (Regulation) – METSOLA report – 2018/0330B (COD) – Follow-up of ‘False and Authentic Documents Online (FADO) system’

The Commission approved the line set out in SP(2020) 35 and took note of the compromise text annexed thereto.

Special legislative procedures and non-legislative dossiers

– Conclusion of the Free Trade Agreement between the European Union and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (Council decision) – 2018/0356 (NLE) / Conclusion of the Investment Protection Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, of the other part (Council decision) – 2018/0358 (NLE) / Free Trade Agreement (report and proposal for a resolution) –

2018/0356M (NLE) / Investment Protection Agreement (report and proposal for a resolution) – 2018/0358M (NLE) – Rapports BOURGEOIS

The Commission took note of SP(2020) 34/2.

Implementing acts and measures

– Limitation of the use of lead and its compounds in polyvinyl chloride (PVC) products – draft Commission Regulation amending Annex XVII to Regulation (EC) 1907/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on the Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH), establishing a European Chemicals Agency, amending Directive 1999/45/EC and repealing Council Regulation (EEC) 793/93 and Commission Regulation (EC) 1488/94 as well as Council Directive 76/769/EEC and Commission Directives 91/155/EEC, 93/67/EEC, 93/105/EC and 2000/21/EC – Objection pursuant to Rule 112 of the European Parliament's Rules of Procedure

The Commission approved the line set out in SP(2020) 33.

Delegated acts

– Trans-European energy infrastructure – Projects of common interest – Commission Delegated Regulation of 31 October 2019 amending Regulation (EU) 347/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council as regards the Union list of projects of common interest (C(2019) 7772) – Objection pursuant to Rule 112 of the European Parliament's Rules of Procedure

The Commission approved the line set out in SP(2020) 41.

4.3. RELATIONS WITH THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL AND THE COUNCIL

iii) Programming of Council business
(SI(2020) 35 and /2)

The Commission took note of the information in SI(2020) 35/2 on the Council meetings between 6 and 19 February 2020.

4.4. RELATIONS WITH PARLIAMENT

iv) Action to be taken on Parliament's legislative resolutions and other resolutions of a legal nature
(SP(2020) 25)

The Commission took note of document SP(2020) 25, drawn up following Parliament's January II 2020 part-session.

v) Action taken on the legislative opinions and non-legislative resolutions adopted by Parliament at its January I 2020 part-session
(point 5.6.1 of the IRG record)

The Commission approved document SP(2020) 43 on the action taken on the legislative opinions and non-legislative resolutions adopted by Parliament at its January I 2020 part-session, for transmission to Parliament.

vi) Results of Parliament's January II 2020 part-session
(point 5.8.1 of the IRG record)

The Commission took note of the information on Parliament's part-session held on 29 and 30 January 2020 in Brussels, set out in SP(2020) 39.

5. COORDINATION OF EXTERNAL ACTION (RCC(2020) 17 AND /2)

The Commission took note of the operational conclusions in RCC(2020) 17/2 of the meeting of the Group for External Coordination (EXCO) held on Wednesday 29 January 2020.

6. WRITTEN PROCEDURES, EMPOWERMENT AND DELEGATION OF POWERS

6.1. WRITTEN PROCEDURES APPROVED (SEC(2020) 58 ET SEQ.)

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted between 27 and 31 January 2020.

6.2. EMPOWERMENT (SEC(2020) 59 ET SEQ.)

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted between 27 and 31 January 2020.

6.3. DELEGATION / SUBDELEGATION OF POWERS (SEC(2020) 60 ET SEQ.)

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted under the delegation and subdelegation procedure between 27 and 31 January 2020 archived in Decide.

6.4. SIGNIFICANT WRITTEN PROCEDURES (SEC(2020) 61)

The Commission took note of the significant written procedures for which the time limit expired between 3 and 7 February 2020.

7. ADMINISTRATIVE AND BUDGETARY MATTERS (SEC(2020) 62/2)

7.1. ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

ACTIVITIES OF THREE MEMBERS OF THE COMMISSION AFTER LEAVING OFFICE
(C(2020) 9000; C(2020) 9001; C(2020) 9002)

The Commission adopted the Decisions set out in C(2020) 9000, C(2020) 9001 and C(2020) 9002.

The Commission specifically decided that the activities envisaged by Ms THYSSEN, Mr MOEDAS and Mr JUNCKER after leaving office as Members of the Commission were compatible with Article 245(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) and with the Code of Conduct for Commissioners, subject to certain specific conditions and obligations.

7.2. BUDGETARY MATTERS

RELATIONS WITH THE EUROPEAN COURT OF AUDITORS

At the request of the PRESIDENT, Mr HAHN drew the Commission’s attention, at the start of its term of office, to the importance of the work carried out by the European Court of Auditors to foster optimum management of the Union’s finances.

As the European Union’s independent external auditor, it played a crucial role in the annual discharge exercise, particularly via its annual reports on the implementation of the general budget of the Union and the European Development Fund.

He explained that the Court of Auditors was also able to carry out performance audits in political fields or individual sectors. These audits did not merely consist of factual verifications of compliance; they also evaluated the various aspects of the Commission’s intervention process, in something verging on a political assessment exercise.

He therefore felt that it was of paramount importance to build trust and establish a constructive dialogue between the Commission and the Court of Auditors. A good understanding of the political context in which the Commission operated could allow audits to be refined and lead to constructive and useable recommendations.

Mr HAHN therefore invited the members of the College to lay the foundations for such a relationship. For his part, he had contacted the President of the European Court of Auditors, Mr Klaus-Heiner LEHNE, to foster dialogue going beyond the annual meeting of the two colleges. He pointed out that the members of the Commission would easily be able to identify their counterparts by referring to the Court of Auditors’ organisational chart, and that his teams were available to provide any support they might need.

The Commission took note of this information.

8. COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN CENTRAL BANK, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS – ECONOMIC GOVERNANCE REVIEW

(COM(2020) 55 AND /2; SWD(2020) 210 AND /2; SWD(2020) 211 AND /2; RCC(2020) 16)

The PRESIDENT invited Mr DOMBROVSKIS and Mr GENTILONI to present the communication submitted to the Commission for approval that day with a view to launching a public debate on a possible reform of the legal framework of the Union's economic and fiscal governance, based on an objective review of the existing rules.

Mr DOMBROVSKIS referred to the foundations underpinning the extensive body of rules on the Union's economic and fiscal governance.

He recalled that, in 1992, the Maastricht Treaty had recognised the need for sound fiscal policies and coordination of national economic policies to allow the smooth implementation of the common monetary policy. Since then, under rules which were now well-known, the Treaties had required Member States to avoid public deficits exceeding 3% of GDP and to maintain their public debt at less than 60% of GDP.

He pointed out that the surveillance framework had evolved over time to deal with the emergence of new economic challenges, such as in 2011, 2012 and 2013, in response to the economic and financial crisis. By adopting the 'six-pack' and 'two-pack' legislation packages, the Union had learned the painful lessons of the crisis, namely, the need to make the most of favourable economic conditions to build up fiscal reserves so as to guard against subsequent shocks, on the one hand, and on the other, the need to monitor not just public debt levels but also macroeconomic imbalances.

Mr DOMBROVSKIS explained to the College that the communication presented that day gave a retrospective overview of the effectiveness of the economic and fiscal governance framework in light of the objectives of economic stability and sustainable public finances.

He emphasised its numerous successes, starting with improved financial stability, which had allowed the European economy to enjoy seven consecutive years of growth and reduce macroeconomic imbalances. He also noted with satisfaction that, whereas in 2011 twenty-four Member States had been under the Excessive Deficit Procedure, none were today.

Nonetheless, he acknowledged that the review had also highlighted certain weaknesses. In addition to the excessively complex rules, certain Member States still had large amounts of public debt, the reduction in macroeconomic imbalances was slowing down, external debt remained high and fiscal surpluses were still unused in a number of countries.

Mr DOMBROVSKIS felt that, based on this mixed factual assessment, a public debate now needed to be launched to let the parties concerned express their views on the functioning of these rules and on the means by which they might contribute more effectively to creating conditions favourable to investment and growth.

On the one hand, he emphasised the need for this debate to take into account the changes in the macroeconomic environment in recent years. Characterised by weak growth, low interest rates and flagging impetus for reform, it was radically different from that which existed when the rules were created, in response to the economic and financial crisis.

On the other hand, he stressed the importance of considering the contribution that could be made by the economic and fiscal governance framework to the policies which the Union intended to introduce to meet current challenges such as the climate and digital transitions and the ageing of its population.

He drew the Commission's attention to the value of a public debate that would be as open and inclusive as possible, moving away from entrenched ideological positions, and based around nine questions. This debate would run until mid-2020 and realistic conclusions would be drawn from it in the second half of the year in order to decide on how the Commission could proceed. Nonetheless, he felt that, at this point, the

Commission should refrain from issuing any concrete proposals, so as to avoid prematurely influencing the public debate.

In conclusion, Mr DOMBROVSKIS stressed the need for political ownership of all the rules in order to re-establish a high level of mutual trust between Member States and between the Member States and the Commission, as the guardian of the economic and fiscal governance rules. He noted that trust had been undermined precisely because of the excessive complexity of the rules in question.

Mr GENTILONI focused on the undisputed objectives of the economic and fiscal governance framework, namely maintaining financial stability within the limits laid down in the treaties as well as supporting growth.

Without denying the not inconsiderable success of the existing governance framework, to which Mr DOMBROVSKIS had referred, he pointed to some of its weaknesses, in particular the failure to significantly reduce budget surpluses, insufficient public investment and a frequently procyclical fiscal stance.

In terms of the avenues for improvement expected from the debate, he also noted the importance of taking into consideration the current macroeconomic context, which was radically different from that which prompted the drawing up of the rules in force and was characterised by great uncertainty, both within the EU and outside it. He further pointed to two essential parameters to take into account, on the one hand, the need to marshal massive investment to take up the urgent challenges facing the European Union and, on the other, the necessity of simplifying the rules while expanding their scope.

On the second point, he argued that making the rules more intelligible would enhance the political ownership taken by the Member States and boost their confidence vis-à-vis one another and the Commission, two key factors to ensure their effectiveness of the rules.

Mr GENTILONI emphasised the advantage of an open and frank debate focused on results, after which, on the strength of the contributions received and the consensus arrived at on these sensitive political issues, the Commission would consider the practical ways and means of acting upon it.

The PRESIDENT referred to a number of issues raised by Mr DOMBROVSKIS and Mr GENTILONI in their presentations.

On the one hand, the European Union suffered from a definite investment gap both public and private, as was clearly illustrated by the comparison with the United States and China, and this was its main weakness. On the other, the European Union had an economic and fiscal governance framework rooted in the treaties which, thanks to its 3% government deficit and 60% government debt rules, inter alia, meant that debt in relation to gross domestic product was not comparable to the 150% level posted by the United States or Japan’s 158%. She emphasised, however, that the big difference between the European Union and these other major economic powers lay in the fact that, unlike them, the EU had no single, comprehensive financial architecture and that discussions on this issue among the Member States were at a standstill as they were still highly divided on the matter. She therefore held that it was for the Commission to come up with and put forward a new approach which built bridges between Member States in order to cope with the investment gap. That was exactly what the public consultation beginning with that day's Communication should make possible.

In the course of the discussion that followed, the Commission raised the following key points:

– the usefulness and the appropriateness of debating whether the rules on economic and fiscal governance drawn up in a crisis situation were still valid at present in a significantly different context and a highly uncertain environment worldwide;

– the need for the Commission to take a thoroughly neutral approach towards the debate, with an entirely open mind-set and without prejudging the outcome, in order to encourage the emergence of constructive ideas and a consensus among stakeholders;

– the vital importance for the Commission of speaking with one voice on the highly sensitive issue of economic and fiscal surveillance;

– the objective and honest account provided by the Communication;

– encouragement to anticipate the question of the relevance of the rule obliging Member States to avoid government deficits of more than 3% of gross domestic product in the current economic environment, especially following the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union;

– acknowledgement of the positive effects of the flexibility adopted in the past within a regulatory context that had become more and more complicated;

– a general consensus on the complexity of the rules and the resulting lack of political ownership and trust, and on the need to fund the European Union's new political priorities prompted by the pressing climate, digital and demographic challenges;

– possible tie-ins between the debate being launched and the conference on the future of Europe.

The PRESIDENT reiterated the importance of simplifying as far as possible the economic and fiscal surveillance framework and the urgent need to establish conditions conducive towards marshalling investment both public and private, since they were linked to each other, in order to address the challenges arising.

She wanted the Commission to remain neutral and not to prejudge the outcome in order to allow for a debate that would be open and as constructive as possible.

To conclude, the PRESIDENT drew attention to the confidentiality rules that applied to everyone.

Following these presentations, the Commission approved the Communication in COM(2020) 55/2 for transmission to Parliament, the Council, the European Central Bank, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions and, for information, to the national parliaments, together with the staff working documents distributed as SWD(2020) 210/2 and SWD(2020) 211/2, the contents of which were noted.

9. COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS – ENHANCING THE ACCESSION PROCESS – A CREDIBLE EU PERSPECTIVE FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS
(COM(2020) 57 TO /5; RCC(2020) 18)

Mr BORRELL presented to the College the communication on enhancing the integration process and a credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans which he was tabling for approval.

He began with a reminder that the European Council in October 2019 had decided not to open accession negotiations with the Republic of North Macedonia and Albania, a decision which had been very badly received in both countries, so much so that it had triggered a government crisis in the former. For that reason, that day's communication represented a credibility test for the EU, which needed to adapt the methodology of the accession process and at the same time reaffirm its commitment to provide a European perspective for the Western Balkans.

In order to enhance the accession process, the communication proposed to (i) define more credible mechanisms for establishing a relationship of trust based on clear commitments, (ii) enhance political steering to take greater account of the highly political nature of the accession process, (iii) ensure a more dynamic process by grouping the negotiating chapters into six thematic clusters, and (iv) make the outcome of the process more predictable by clarifying what the Union expected from the countries concerned at the various stages of the process.

By making these adjustments, the Union re-affirmed its support for the integration of the Western Balkans and at the same time set out the positive consequences of the progress made in implementing the reforms, as well as the negative consequences resulting from the lack of such progress.

He stressed that in general terms, it was important to convince the candidate countries of their accession prospects if the Union wanted to have the necessary means and influence to ensure the region's stability and, ultimately, integrate them.

Mr VÁRHELYI took the floor and spoke of the considerable political damage caused by the European Council’s failure to decide to open negotiations with two candidate countries at its meeting on 17 and 18 October 2019. This indecision had triggered a political shockwave in Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia, where it had resulted in a significant loss of credibility for the Union, making it all the more difficult to re-establish a relationship of trust between the parties involved.

Since then, however, both countries had clearly signalled their intention to pursue their structural reforms and the Commission was building on this foundation to propose enhancing the enlargement process. The Union was still the leading investor in the region, accounting for 72% of total investment, but other powers were also already present in the region and could increase their influence there if doubts arose over the European prospects of the candidate countries.

In these circumstances, he stressed the importance of getting the enlargement process back on track through a strategy – in which today’s communication was simply the first step – that should lead to the re-establishment of a relationship of trust based on credible reciprocal commitments. The second stage of this strategy would be to obtain the agreement of the Member States on the opening of accession negotiations at the General Affairs Council on 24 March. The Commission was stepping up its contacts with the Member States in order to prepare them for a constructive debate on the prospects for enlargement, and there was greater openness as regards relaunching the process.

Mr VÁRHELYI reiterated that an enhanced accession process would continue to be founded on the Copenhagen criteria and on a fair approach based on the merits of each candidate. He then presented the main elements of the communication.

The first aspect involved **enhancing the credibility of the accession process** by emphasising even more strongly the fundamental reforms concerning the rule of law, the functioning of democratic institutions, public administration and the economy in the candidate countries. He stressed that once the countries in question satisfied the objective criteria, the Member States would have to agree to move on to the next stage of the process while upholding the principle of the merit-based approach.

The second aspect involved **establishing more assertive political steering**. The Commission therefore proposed strengthening the high-level political and strategic dialogue through meetings at the regular summit between the Union and the representatives of the Western Balkans and via more frequent ministerial contacts. Member States should also be involved more systematically in monitoring and reviewing the process. All the bodies covered by the Stabilisation and Association Agreement would have a greater interest in the main political issues and major reforms, while intergovernmental conferences would promote enhanced political steering of the negotiations.

The third aspect involved **a more dynamic negotiating process**. With this in mind, he indicated that the Commission proposed to regroup the negotiating chapters into six thematic clusters, namely (i) the ‘fundamentals’ of reforms in areas close to fundamental rights and the rule of law, (ii) the internal market, (iii) competitiveness and inclusive growth, (iv) the green agenda and sustainable connectivity, (v) resources, agriculture and cohesion, and (vi) external relations. Negotiations on each cluster would be opened on a broad basis once the opening criteria had been met, rather than on the basis of individual chapters. Negotiations on the 'fundamentals' would be opened first and closed last and progress on these would determine the overall pace of negotiations. Lastly, the time between the opening of a cluster of chapters and the closure of the various chapters would have to be reduced, preferably to less than a year, depending on the progress of the reforms, in order to encourage the candidate countries to actively pursue them.

The fourth and final aspect involved **making the process more predictable**. The Commission needed to provide more clarity on what the EU expected from the countries concerned at the different stages of the negotiation process. As Mr BORRELL had emphasised, the aim was to set out clearly the positive consequences of the progress that would be made in implementing the reforms, as well as the negative consequences resulting from the lack of such progress.

Finally, looking ahead to the next stages of the strategy being deployed, Mr VÁRHELYI hoped that the Member States would endorse the proposed new methodology in parallel with the opening of accession negotiations with the Republic of North Macedonia and Albania, ahead of the European Union-Western Balkans summit to be held in Zagreb on 6-7 May 2020. At that point the Commission would look at how to improve investment, socioeconomic integration and the rule of law in the Western Balkans. He believed that the European Union should be in a position in Zagreb to propose a new economic development plan for the region to strengthen resilience, invest in education and promote growth and jobs.

In the course of the discussion that followed, the Commission raised the following key points:

– the importance of stressing the structural reforms linked to the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights, and of the Union providing technical assistance for institution-building in the candidate countries;

- the need to point out that the Commission would carry out an assessment of the respect for the rule of law by its own Member States, which were therefore required to meet the same criteria as the candidate countries;

- the case for supporting the candidate countries' commitment to continuing the reforms introduced, despite the disappointment at the outcome of the European Council meeting in October 2019;

- the merits of the approach of grouping the negotiating chapters thematically, which should make it possible to reduce the number of decisions taken unanimously and thus smooth the progress of the negotiations;

- the importance of an EU investment policy in the Western Balkans to promote regional integration, while at the same time supporting the structural reforms introduced under the accession policy;

- the political reasons why certain Member States opposed the opening of negotiations and hence the need for a political approach to enable the enlargement process to be relaunched;

- in this context, the importance of bearing in mind the difference between opening negotiations and joining the European Union; accession could take place only once the negotiations had been concluded and the structural reforms fully implemented;

- the need to stress the principle of reversibility of negotiations in order to penalise proportionately any serious or prolonged stagnation or backtracking in the implementation of the reforms and compliance with the demands inherent in the accession process;

- the geostrategic importance of the Western Balkans region, hence the importance of reaffirming that they were destined to become EU members at the end of the accession process;

– questions relating to the relevance of the theme of enlargement in the forthcoming public debates to be held in connection with the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Mr VÁRHELYI returned to the question of reducing the period of time between opening a group of chapters and closing the individual chapters, ideally to less than one year. He explained that this measure was intended to encourage candidate countries to step up the pace of reform in the expectation that this would speed up the negotiations. This was the corollary to the principle of reversibility of negotiations in the event of a delay in implementing the reforms, and was thus essential to the overall balance of the approach proposed.

He also noted that the economic development plan that the Commission intended to present at the Zagreb summit would take full account of the need to promote the regional integration of the candidate countries from this point of view.

He also stressed that respect for the rule of law was at the heart of the proposed approach, as illustrated by the way the negotiating chapters were grouped around different themes, one of which was devoted entirely to reforms linked to the rule of law.

The new enlargement methodology being proposed primarily concerned the Western Balkans, as the candidacy of other countries was currently on hold.

Finally, Mr VÁRHELYI regretted that the draft communication had been leaked to the press, which had commented extensively on the text before it had even been adopted by the College. He felt that an enquiry should be carried out to identify the source of these leaks and to protect the confidentiality of the Commission’s work.

Mr BORRELL emphasised the balanced nature of the methodological approach being proposed for pursuing the enlargement process and recommended explaining it in detail to the candidate countries, particularly as regards the technical aspects, in order to avoid any confusion or misunderstanding.

The PRESIDENT concluded the discussion by stressing the importance of good communication on the methodology proposed by the Commission, directed both at the Member States and at the candidate countries, in order to rebuild a climate of mutual trust and to reaffirm the ultimate goal of the accession of the Western Balkans to the European Union.

She asked Members to do whatever they considered necessary to prevent leaks and protect the confidentiality of the Commission's work and the collective nature of its discussions.

Following these presentations, the Commission approved the Communication in COM(2020) 57/5 for transmission to Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions and, for information, to the national parliaments.

10. OTHER BUSINESS

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN EXTERNAL RELATIONS

The PRESIDENT asked Mr BORRELL to report on the latest developments in external relations.

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The Commission's other discussions on certain agenda items are recorded in the special minutes.

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The meeting closed at 12.15.