



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

SECRETARIAT-GENERAL

PV(2023) 2448 final

- English translation of the French version which is authentic -

Brussels, 29 March 2023

TEXTE EN

MINUTES

of the 2448th meeting of the Commission

held in Brussels

(Berlaymont)

on Wednesday 1st March 2023

(morning)

PV(2023) 2448 final

- English translation of the French version which is authentic -

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Single sitting: Wednesday 1st March 2023 (morning)

The sitting opened at 9.08 with Ms von der LEYEN, President, in the chair.

Present:

Ms von der LEYEN	President	
Ms VESTAGER	Executive Vice-President	
Mr ŠEFČOVIČ	Vice-President	
Ms JOUROVÁ	Vice-President	
Ms ŠUICA	Vice-President	
Mr SCHINAS	Vice-President	
Mr HAHN	Member	
Ms GABRIEL	Member	Items 8 to 11
Mr SCHMIT	Member	
Mr GENTILONI	Member	
Mr WOJCIECHOWSKI	Member	
Mr BRETON	Member	
Ms FERREIRA	Member	
Ms KYRIAKIDES	Member	
Mr LENARČIČ	Member	
Ms VÁLEAN	Member	
Ms URPILAINEN	Member	
Ms SIMSON	Member	
Ms McGUINNESS	Member	

Absent:

Mr TIMMERMANS	Executive Vice-President
Mr DOMBROVSKIS	Executive Vice-President
Mr BORRELL i FONTELLES	High Representative/ Vice-President

Mr REYNDERS	Member
Ms DALLI	Member
Ms JOHANSSON	Member
Mr VÁRHELYI	Member
Mr SINKEVIČIUS	Member

The following sat in to represent absent Members of the Commission:

Mr VISEK	Member of Mr TIMMERMANS's cabinet
Ms VEGNERE	Deputy Head of Cabinet to Mr DOMBROVSKIS
Mr VILLARINO	Head of Cabinet to Mr BORRELL
Ms TUTS	Head of Cabinet to Mr REYNDERS
Ms GERHARDS	Deputy Head of Cabinet to Ms DALLI
Ms WEBER	Head of Cabinet to Ms JOHANSSON
Ms TEEDUMÄE	Deputy Head of Cabinet to Mr VÁRHELYI
Ms PREISING	Head of Cabinet to Mr SINKEVIČIUS

The following also sat in:

Mr SEIBERT	Head of Cabinet to the PRESIDENT
Mr CALLEJA CRESPO	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
Ms PETKOVA	Director of Coordination and Administration in the PRESIDENT's cabinet
Mr VAN KEMSEKE	Adviser in the PRESIDENT's cabinet
Ms ALLOUIS-LE LOSTEC	Head of Unit in the Secretariat-General
Mr VALERO	Secretariat-General

Secretary: Ms JUHANSONE, Secretary-General, assisted by Ms DEPREZ, Director in the Secretariat-General.

At the request of the PRESIDENT, the College held a minute of silence in memory of the victims of the tragic train accident which occurred in Greece in the night of 28 February to 1 March 2023 near the city of Larissa.

Mr SCHINAS explained the circumstances of the train disaster and highlighted the extreme difficulties faced at the site, in particular for evacuating the victims. He deplored the high number of casualties, giving a provisional figure of 36 people killed and more than 60 injured. He added that it was too early to tell whether the tragedy was due to human or technical error. He proposed sending a strong message of support to Greece and to the victims and their families at the press conference which would take place after the College's meeting.

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1. AGENDAS

(OJ(2023) 2448/FINAL; SEC(2023) 2448/FINAL)

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

2. WEEKLY MEETING OF HEADS OF CABINET

(RCC(2023) 2448)

The Commission considered the Secretary-General's report on the weekly meeting of Heads of Cabinet held on Monday 27 February 2023.

3. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES

The Commission held over approval of the minutes of its 2444th, 2445th, 2446th and 2447th meetings of 1, 8, 14 and 22 February 2023 for a later date.

4. INTERINSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS

(RCC(2023) 67)

The Commission took note of the record of the meeting of the Interinstitutional Relations Group (IRG) held by videoconference on Friday 24 February 2023 (RCC(2023) 67).

The Commission approved the lines proposed for the following points:

- **‘Fit for 55’ – Energy Efficiency (Directive – recast) – FUGLSANG report – 2021/0203 (COD)**

Line set out in SI(2023) 34.

- **Establishment of ‘Eurodac’ for the comparison of biometric data for the effective application of Regulation (EU) 604/2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person, and for identifying an illegally staying third-country national or stateless person, and on requests for the comparison with Eurodac data by Member States’ law enforcement authorities and Europol for law enforcement purposes (Regulation - recast) – BUXADÉ VILLALBA report – 2016/0132 (COD) as amended by COM(2020) 614**

Line set out in SI(2023) 33.

- **Amendment of Directives 2011/61/EU and 2009/65/EC as regards delegation arrangements, liquidity risk management, supervisory reporting, provision of depositary and custody services and loan origination by alternative investment funds (Directive) – BENJUMEA report – 2021/0376 (COD)**

Line set out in SI(2023) 35.

- **European green bonds (Regulation) – TANG report – 2021/0191 (COD)**

Line set out in SI(2023) 41.

- **Commission's reply to a Council request based on Article 241 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union included in a unilateral statement by the Council on heading 7**

Line set out in SI(2023) 36.

- **EU position for the consultations between the EU and the United Kingdom to agree on fishing opportunities for sandeel in the North Sea, and Norway pout in the North Sea for 2023 and 2024 where applicable**

Line set out in SI(2023) 38.

- **Resolution of the European Parliament under Article 225 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) – Revision of European Works Councils Directive – RADTKE report – 2019/2183 (INL)**

Line set out in SP(2023) 107.

- **EU position to be taken in the meetings of the Specialised Committee on Fisheries (SCF), established under Article 508 of the EU-United Kingdom Trade and Cooperation Agreement**

Line set out in SI(2023) 40.

- **Request by the UK Financial Conduct Authority to become a member of the ‘Monitoring Board’ of the International Financial Reporting Standards Foundation**

Line set out in SPI(2023) 8.

The Commission approved the line proposed for the following point, for transmission to the European Parliament:

- **Commission replies to the non-legislative resolutions adopted by the European Parliament at its part-session of December 2022**

Line set out in SP(2023) 111.

5. COORDINATION OF EXTERNAL ACTION (RCC(2023) 12)

The Commission took note of the operational conclusions in RCC(2023) 12 of the meeting of the Group for External Coordination (EXCO) held on Wednesday 22 February 2023.

6. WRITTEN PROCEDURES, EMPOWERMENT AND DELEGATION OF POWERS

6.1. WRITTEN PROCEDURES APPROVED (SEC(2023) 101 ET SEQ.)

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General’s memoranda recording decisions adopted between 20 and 26 February 2023.

6.2. EMPOWERMENT (SEC(2023) 102 ET SEQ.)

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted between 20 and 26 February 2023.

6.3. *DELEGATION / SUBDELEGATION OF POWERS*
(SEC(2023) 103 ET SEQ.)

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted under the delegation and subdelegation procedures between 20 and 26 February 2023 archived in Decide.

6.4. *SIGNIFICANT WRITTEN PROCEDURES*
(SEC(2023) 104 AND /2)

The Commission took note of the significant written procedures for which the time limit expired between 27 February and 3 March 2023.

7. *ADMINISTRATIVE AND BUDGETARY MATTERS*
(SEC(2023) 105)

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS
(PERS(2023) 20)

7.1. *DG AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT – APPOINTMENT*
OF A DIRECTOR AT GRADE AD14/15
(PERS(2023) 21 TO /3)

The Commission had before it applications under Article 29(1)(a)(i) and (iii) of the Staff Regulations for the post of Director of the 'Assurance and Audit' Directorate in DG Agriculture and Rural Development (PERS(2023) 21).

It took note of the opinions of the Consultative Committee on Appointments of 20 December 2022 and 12 January 2023 (PERS(2023) 21/2 and /3).

The Commission proceeded to compare the applicants' qualifications for the post. On a proposal from Mr HAHN, in agreement with the PRESIDENT, and after consulting Mr WOJCIECHOWSKI, it then decided to appoint Ms Marie BOURJOU to the post.

This decision would take effect on a date to be determined.

**7.2. DG INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS – APPOINTMENT OF A DIRECTOR AT GRADE AD14/15
(PERS(2023) 22 TO /3)**

The Commission had before it applications under Article 29(1)(a)(i) and (iii) of the Staff Regulations for the post of Director of the 'Human Development, Migration, Governance and Peace' Directorate in DG International Partnerships (PERS(2023) 22).

It took note of the opinions of the Consultative Committee on Appointments of 9 and 19 October 2022 (PERS(2023) 22/2 and /3).

The Commission proceeded to compare the applicants' qualifications for the post. On a proposal from Mr HAHN, in agreement with the PRESIDENT, and after consulting Ms URPILAINEN, it then decided to appoint Ms Erica GERRETSEN to the post.

This decision would take effect on a date to be determined.

**7.3. DG RESEARCH AND INNOVATION – ADOPTION OF A LIST OF CANDIDATES FOR THE POST OF EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE INNOVATIVE HEALTH INITIATIVE JOINT UNDERTAKING (IHI JU) AT GRADE AD14
(PERS(2023) 23 TO /3)**

On a proposal from Mr HAHN, in agreement with the PRESIDENT and after consulting Ms GABRIEL, the Commission decided:

- to approve the list of two candidates, presented in order of preference, set out in point 3 of PERS(2023) 20, for the post of Executive Director of the Innovative Health Initiative Joint Undertaking (IHI JU) in DG Research and Innovation, and to consider this list as the Commission proposal;
- to ask the Member of the Commission responsible, Ms GABRIEL, to communicate this decision to the Governing Board of the Innovative Health Initiative Joint Undertaking.

These decisions would take effect immediately.

7.4. DG DEFENCE INDUSTRY AND SPACE – AUTHORISATION FOR THE INTERNAL AND INTERINSTITUTIONAL PUBLICATION, AT GRADE AD15/16, AND EXTERNAL PUBLICATION, AT GRADE AD15, OF A POST OF DEPUTY DIRECTOR-GENERAL (PERS(2023) 24)

On a proposal from Mr HAHN, in agreement with the PRESIDENT, and after consulting Mr BRETON, the Commission decided to authorise the internal and interinstitutional publication, at grade AD15/16, and external publication, at grade AD15, of the vacancy notice in PERS(2023) 24 for the post of Deputy Director-General – responsible for Directorates B and C – in DG Defence Industry and Space, in accordance with Article 29(1)(a)(i) and (iii), Article 29(1)(b) and Article 29(2) of the Staff Regulations.

This decision would take effect immediately.

7.5. DG COMPETITION – AUTHORISATION TO RECRUIT A MEMBER OF THE TEMPORARY STAFF, UNDER ARTICLE 2(A) OF THE CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT OF OTHER SERVANTS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, AND EXTERNAL PUBLICATION OF A VACANCY NOTICE FOR A DIRECTOR POST AT GRADE AD14 (PERS(2023) 25)

On a proposal from Mr HAHN, in agreement with the PRESIDENT and after consulting Ms VESTAGER, the Commission decided:

- to authorise the recruitment of a member of the temporary staff at grade AD14, under Article 2(a) of the Conditions of Employment of Other Servants of the European Union, with a view to filling the Director-level post of Chief Technology Officer in DG Competition, for a period of three years, renewable once for a maximum of two years;
- to base the selection solely on the candidates' renown, competence and expertise in the field of industrial economics – regardless of their nationality or country of origin;
- to widen the reserve list of candidates by accepting world-class academics specialised in industrial economics, in addition to candidates drawn from the public service or semi-public bodies as allowed by Commission Decision C(2013) 9049 final of 16 December 2013 on policies for the engagement and use of temporary agents;
- to authorise the external publication of the vacancy notice set out in PERS(2023) 25.

These decisions would take effect immediately.

7.6. DG COMMUNICATION – APPOINTMENT OF A HEAD OF REPRESENTATION AND A HEAD OF A REGIONAL OFFICE OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

The Commission took note of the decisions taken by the Appointing Authority to appoint Mr Lorenzo VELLA to the post of Head of the European Commission Representation in Valletta, in Malta, and Ms Claudia COLLA to the post of Head of the Regional Office of the European Commission Representation in Milan, in Italy.

These decisions would take effect on a date to be determined.

8. **PROPOSAL FOR A DIRECTIVE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL ON DRIVING LICENCES, AMENDING DIRECTIVE (EU) 2022/2561 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL, REGULATION (EU) 2018/1724 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL AND REPEALING DIRECTIVE 2006/126/EC OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL AND COMMISSION REGULATION (EU) NO 383/2012 (COM(2023) 127 AND /2; SWD(2023) 128 AND /2; SWD(2023) 129 TO /2; SEC(2023) 350; RCC(2023) 71)**
9. **PROPOSAL FOR A DIRECTIVE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL ON THE UNION-WIDE EFFECT OF CERTAIN DRIVING DISQUALIFICATIONS (COM(2023) 128 AND /2; SWD(2023) 128 AND /2; SWD(2023) 129 AND /2; SEC(2023) 350; RCC(2023) 71)**
10. **PROPOSAL FOR A DIRECTIVE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL AMENDING DIRECTIVE (EU) 2015/413 FACILITATING CROSS-BORDER EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION ON ROAD-SAFETY-RELATED TRAFFIC OFFENCES (COM(2023) 126 AND /2; SWD(2023) 126; SWD(2023) 127; SEC(2023) 351; RCC(2023) 71)**

Ms VĂLEAN began by explaining the EU's ambitious goal in terms of road safety, namely no deaths or serious injuries on the roads by 2050. To achieve this, the Commission, inspired by the Valletta Declaration of EU Transport Ministers adopted in 2017, included in its EU Road Safety Framework an intermediary goal to halve the number of deaths and serious injuries by 2030. This priority was also reflected in the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy, with a more general goal

for 2050 to reduce the death toll for all modes of transport in the EU to close to zero.

Although EU roads were the safest in the world, the EU was still far from meeting these goals. Based on the preliminary figures for 2022, more than 20 000 people were killed in road accidents last year. Therefore, further efforts were needed at all levels, including national and local. Ms VĂLEAN felt that the road safety package presented that day, focusing on road user behaviour, was an important EU contribution to improving European road safety.

Changes to the current framework were also needed to take into account technological, medical and scientific progress, as well as new mobility patterns and devices, which were increasingly present on European roads. Current rules also needed to be updated, to address current and incoming challenges such as reducing road transport CO₂ emissions, driver shortages and increased digitalisation.

The proposals for a Directive presented for approval that day would have a direct impact on citizens as they covered private and professional use of vehicles and driving licenses of all vehicle categories. The measures would also have an impact on the safety of all road users, not only drivers but also cyclists and pedestrians.

Ms VĂLEAN then explained in more details the three proposals of the package: (i) a recast of the current driving licences Directive, (ii) a new proposal for a Directive on driving disqualifications and (iii) a proposal to amend the Directive on cross-border enforcement of road traffic rules.

The proposal for a Directive on driving licences aimed to simplify the rules and facilitate recognition of driving licences between Member States. To this end, the Directive would introduce a digital driving licence recognised in all Member States, clarify the definition of ‘normal residence’ and apply a language exemption to allow residents coming from other Member States to take a test in their home country in their native language. It would also make it easier for citizens of third countries with comparable road safety rules to exchange their driving licence for an EU licence.

Ms VĂLEAN explained that the proposal also aimed to make the European framework more sustainable, modern and inclusive. The updated rules on driving tests would take into account the transition to zero-emission vehicles by, for example, assessing knowledge and skills relating to advanced driver assistance systems and other automated technologies. The permitted weight for 'B' category vehicles would be adjusted for alternatively fuelled vehicles, given that zero-emission vehicles equipped with a battery could be heavier. Finally, health screening would be adapted to medical progress.

The proposal targeted only real risks. Thus, novice drivers would be subject to a probation period of at least two years after passing their driving test, and to a zero-tolerance rule on drink-driving. Driving tests would become more focused on risk awareness and hazard perception, especially in the context of sharing the road with vulnerable road users such as cyclists and pedestrians. Finally, a more targeted approach to medical fitness was proposed for 'A' and 'B' category driving licences, with a self-assessment as a minimum, even for renewals, and more frequent checks for drivers over 70, while keeping the possibility for Member States to require a medical assessment.

Ms VĂLEAN stressed that the proposed measures would also contribute to addressing the shortage of truck drivers. Firstly, young people would be able to take their driving test and begin driving cars and trucks from the age of 17, provided they were accompanied, to gain driving experience. This would allow them to gain faster access to a job as a truck driver. Secondly, staging requirements would be removed, making it possible to apply directly for the desired category of driving licence. Thirdly, the establishment of a knowledge network would promote the exchange of best practices on the integration of foreign professional drivers into the EU market. This network would include national authorities, centres of excellence, universities, researchers, social partners and other road safety stakeholders.

In addition, Ms VĂLEAN noted that the proposal on driving licences incorporated the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic by providing for the possibility of

an administrative extension of the validity of driving licences in the event of a crisis.

Referring to the proposal for a Directive on driving disqualifications she pointed out that, under current rules, where a serious offence resulted in a driving disqualification, and the offence was committed in a Member State other than that in which the licence was issued, the disqualification could only be enforced in the Member State in which the offence was committed. In order to prevent traffic offenders behaving with impunity, a new system would be put in place that would allow driving disqualification decisions to have an EU-wide effect. Disqualifications resulting from the most serious road traffic offences, such as excessive speeding, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and causing death or serious bodily injury would be covered.

Finally, Ms VĂLEAN presented the proposal for a Directive on cross-border enforcement, arguing that while the current rules had helped to ensure that foreign offenders could be traced and to significantly increase the number of cross-border cases investigated, the current framework had its limitations. In 2019 around 40 % of cross-border offences were not investigated, either because the offender had not been identified or because the financial penalties had not been enforced.

On this basis, she considered that the new rules would enhance cross-border cooperation in such a way that drivers who committed road traffic offences abroad would face the consequences of their actions. At the same time, those rules would ensure better protection of the fundamental rights of non-resident offenders.

Ms VĂLEAN stressed that, in practice, the cross-border exchange of information on road traffic offences would be extended to other road traffic offences and that the accuracy of existing cross-border electronic investigations would be improved, including through direct access to national vehicle registers. A dedicated IT portal would be created to facilitate information exchange between national contact points, other competent authorities within Member States and road users, for example on road safety rules in force in the Member States, appeal procedures and penalties

applied.

As regards the protection of fundamental rights, non-resident offenders would retain the right to an effective remedy, to a fair trial, to the presumption of innocence and to defence. The requirements as regards penalty notices would be tightened to ensure that alleged offenders received all the necessary information, for example on the applicable appeal procedures and methods for the payment of fines. Common time limits would be set for sending penalty notices and follow-up documents, and the language regime of the penalty notice would be improved in order to ensure that alleged offenders received documents in the language he or she understood best. Furthermore, presumed offenders would not be required to pay additional legal and administrative costs related to the management of penalties by debt collectors where Member States had decided to use contractors to recover fines.

Ms VĂLEAN concluded her presentation by highlighting the in-depth reflection that had led to the development of the proposed measures and the leading priority that had been given to road safety in each of the elements of the package. She believed that the proposals struck the right balance between action at EU level, the competences of the Member States and the rights of European citizens, and that they would contribute to significantly improving road safety on European roads.

Following these presentations, the Commission:

- adopted the proposals for a Directive in COM(2023) 127/2 and COM(2023) 128/2 for transmission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the national parliaments, and, for information, to the European Data Protection Supervisor, together with the impact assessment, the summary thereof and the opinion of the Regulatory Scrutiny Board in SWD(2023) 128/2, SWD(2023) 129/2 and SEC(2023) 350, the contents of which were noted;
- adopted the proposal for a Directive in COM(2023) 126/2 for transmission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social

Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the national parliaments, and, for information, to the European Data Protection Supervisor, together with the impact assessment, the summary thereof and the opinion of the Regulatory Scrutiny Board in SWD(2023) 126, SWD(2023) 127 and SEC(2023) 351, the contents of which were noted.

11. OTHER BUSINESS

11.1. COMMISSION RESPONSE TO A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION PURSUANT TO ARTICLE 225 OF THE TREATY ON THE FUNCTIONING OF THE EUROPEAN UNION (TFEU) SP(2023) 107

Mr SCHMIT presented to the College the resolution adopted by the European Parliament on 2 February 2023, pursuant to Article 225 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), recommending that the Commission revise the Directive on European Works Councils.

He began by highlighting the important role of European Works Councils, as they contributed to social dialogue and, more specifically, were an effective means of informing and consulting employees at company level. Employees were entitled to be informed and consulted by company management through European Works Councils when companies took strategic decisions in the context of the internal market and globalisation or decided to restructure or implement collective redundancies. European Works Councils were thus part of Europe's long-standing tradition of social dialogue, and the Commission had recently adopted an initiative to strengthen social dialogue at EU and national level.

Social dialogue was all the more important given the need to address the current challenges posed by high energy prices and their impact on

companies' costs and wage adequacy, as well as global competition. Moreover, he considered that social dialogue would need to be instrumental in the EU's approach to relaunching industrialisation in Europe, in line with the Green Deal Industrial Plan and its net-zero initiatives.

Mr SCHMIT noted that the resolution had been adopted on the basis of Article 225 TFEU, which called on the Commission to submit legislative proposals. The European Parliament resolution required the Commission to put forward, by 31 January 2024 at the latest, a legislative proposal to revise Directive 2009/38/EC on European Works Councils, with the aim of strengthening the ability of these Councils to exercise their information and consultation rights, as well as to increase their number, while taking into account the different industrial relations systems in the Member States.

An annex to the resolution set out separate legislative proposals that sought to: (i) provide for injunctive relief and financial penalties where an employer had failed to properly inform and consult its European Works Council; (ii) broaden the concept of transnational matters with respect to which European Works Councils must be consulted and informed; (iii) amend the definition of 'consultation'; (iv) limit the scope of confidentiality restrictions; (v) introduce stricter deadlines for setting up an European Works Council; and (vi) remove exemptions and ensure that commitments made with regard to consultations were subject to the revised rules.

Mr SCHMIT pointed out that, as outlined in the PRESIDENT's political guidelines, the Commission had committed to respond to the European Parliament's own-initiative resolutions based on Article 225 TFEU through legislative acts, in full compliance with the principles of proportionality, subsidiarity and better law-making. Hence the suggestion to ensure follow-up of the required action to be taken in parallel, namely assessing the proposals in the European Parliament resolution and conducting the two-stage consultation of social partners as required under Article 154 TFEU.

By way of conclusion, he stated that, in line with the Commission's working methods, a draft letter had been prepared so that the Vice-President responsible for Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight could inform the European Parliament of the College's decision on the follow-up to the resolution.

The Commission took note of this information.

11.2. RESULTS OF THE G20 FINANCE AND GOVERNMENT MINISTERS MEETING (NEW DELHI, 24 AND 25 FEBRUARY)

At the request of the PRESIDENT, Mr GENTILONI briefed the College on the meeting of G20 finance ministers and central bank governors held on 24 and 25 February in New Delhi. On the whole, there had been a relative consensus during discussions and the participants shared the view that the economic outlook was improving, despite ongoing concerns regarding inflation. A number of countries had also made progress with debt repayment.

However, the participants had not reached an agreement on a joint communiqué, as China and Russia had not approved the paragraphs in the document that made reference to the war in Ukraine based on the wording in the Bali Declaration. He noted that the other G20 members, including Indonesia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia and South Africa, had been willing to accept the inclusion of the wording used in the Bali Declaration.

China's opposition was not a criticism of the Bali Declaration on the war in Ukraine, but rather a reflection of the fact that China questioned the link to the economy and thus the relevance of referring to the matter during the meeting of G20 finance ministers and central bank governors.

Lastly, Mr GENTILONI highlighted the good relations between the G7 members and like-minded global partners that had been in evidence at the

G20 meeting. In particular, he noted the unequivocal support from Australia, Brazil and South Korea for the positions put forward by the G7.

By way of conclusion, the PRESIDENT called on the Members of the College to exercise greater vigilance in order to avoid any undermining of the Bali Declaration at the forthcoming G20 ministerial meetings, in particular the meeting of foreign ministers, which would begin on 2 March in New Delhi. The Declaration was an exceptional agreement that included very clear provisions concerning Russia's war against Ukraine.

The PRESIDENT also welcomed the adoption by the UN General Assembly on 23 February of the resolution on a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine, which had been passed with 141 votes in favour.

The Commission took note of this information.

11.3. LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION'S RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED KINGDOM

The PRESIDENT then presented the political agreement in principle concluded with the United Kingdom on the Windsor Framework, which set out new arrangements for implementing the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. She warmly thanked the Commission departments involved in the negotiations. It was due to their tireless work that innovative joint solutions had been found to the outstanding technical obstacles.

She highlighted the shared values and successful cooperation of the European Union and the United Kingdom on a number of issues, from the response to Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine to the global fight against climate change. She also stressed the importance of the constructive atmosphere that had prevailed during the conclusion of the agreement, and the fact that the discussions had been kept confidential, which had helped strengthen relations based on trust.

The PRESIDENT welcomed the soundness of the joint solutions, identified under the Withdrawal Agreement, with which it would be possible to address the practical difficulties experienced by people and businesses in Northern Ireland regarding the functioning of the Protocol. This agreement in principle also brought an end to the procedure initiated by the British government to pass the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, which had put the Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and the United Kingdom at risk.

As regards the actual provisions of the Windsor Framework, she first emphasised that the Court of Justice of the European Union remained the sole arbiter of EU law. To preserve the integrity of the European single market, a clear distinction had been drawn between goods at risk of entering the European single market and those that would be used in Northern Ireland. Under the new provisions, a balance could therefore be struck between the flexibility granted to the movement of goods intended for final use in Northern Ireland and the application of effective safeguards to protect the EU market.

The PRESIDENT noted that these joint solutions had been made possible in particular through new mechanisms for sharing British trade and customs data, which would form the main basis of the checks under the Windsor Framework. Robust authorisation and monitoring of the trusted trader scheme and enhanced market surveillance and enforcement by the British authorities also served as safeguards, with complete customs procedures being applied to goods at risk of entering the European single market.

With regard to governance, the people of Northern Ireland would now have more of a voice through regular engagement at all levels of the Withdrawal Agreement's structure. A new emergency mechanism, the Stormont Brake, would also allow the British government – at the request of 30 members of the Legislative Assembly in Northern Ireland – to stop the application in Northern Ireland of EU legal provisions likely to have a significant and

lasting impact on the daily life of people and businesses. The PRESIDENT made clear that this mechanism would be triggered only in the most exceptional circumstances and as a last resort, in accordance with a very well-defined procedure, and that the EU could challenge the mechanism's use before an arbitration panel under the Withdrawal Agreement.

Lastly, she highlighted the solutions found to allow the citizens of Northern Ireland access to all medicines, including novel medicines, and foods, at the same time and under the same conditions as the citizens of the rest of the UK. It had been possible to secure these new provisions through a series of safeguards, in particular sanitary and phytosanitary checks and labelling that would be introduced gradually, to ensure that the medicines and agri-food products concerned did not enter the EU single market.

The PRESIDENT welcomed what she considered to be an excellent outcome achieved in complex and often difficult circumstances. She was cautiously optimistic regarding how the new Windsor Framework would be received by the EU Member States and by the UK stakeholders.

Mr ŠEFČOVIČ welcomed the marked improvement in relations between the EU and the UK after two difficult years. He underlined that the high-level exchanges between the PRESIDENT and the British Prime Minister, Rishi SUNAK, as well as her regular contacts with the UK Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and the UK Secretary of State for Northern Ireland had played a decisive role. He also highlighted the key contribution made by the Commission departments, regarding not only the content of the discussions but also the organisational issues that were vital for structuring the negotiations.

With reference to the anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement on 10 April, Mr ŠEFČOVIČ supported the idea that, after 25 years focused on peace, the next 25 years of the Belfast Agreement would aim to guarantee peace and

prosperity on the island of Ireland. In this respect, he emphasised the close contacts maintained between the Commission and the Northern Irish stakeholders throughout the discussions on the Protocol.

In his view, the European approach had been rooted – from the outset – in the idea that greater flexibility was possible provided there were sufficient guarantees and mutual trust. He therefore welcomed the agreement reached whereby the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland had been supplemented by the additional provisions of the Windsor Framework, which avoided a physical border while at the same time protecting the European single market.

Mr ŠEFČOVIČ hoped that Northern Ireland's politicians would also see the significant advantages that the agreement offered them, while on the European side he welcomed the initial very positive reception given to the agreement by the European Parliament and the Council. The various stakeholders, however, would need time before they could express their views, given how dense and technically complex the Windsor Framework was, especially as regards the three legislative proposals that would have to be submitted on novel medicines, tariff quotas for certain categories of steel, and the applicable sanitary and phytosanitary provisions.

In order to transform the joint solutions into legally binding instruments, in the coming weeks the agreement would be submitted to the EU-UK Joint Committee set up under the Withdrawal Agreement. The bodies of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement would play a key role in settling potential disagreements jointly before they became legal disputes.

In conclusion, Mr ŠEFČOVIČ was pleased that a difficult chapter had been closed and that a new, positive phase in the EU's relations with the UK was beginning, with strengthened cooperation not only in geopolitics but in a number of areas and in particular scientific research.

In this connection, the PRESIDENT welcomed the fact that the barriers

preventing British researchers, universities and scientists from participating in the Horizon Europe programme had been removed. As far as the EU was concerned, the door was open to start work immediately on an association agreement with the UK.

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

- strong support for the agreement, which was considered to be fair, while those responsible for it were to be congratulated;
- a marked improvement in the situation compared with the *de facto* absence of any border controls in recent years;
- the importance of emphasising the definitive nature of the negotiated agreement, in a context where demands for changes could still arise;
- the hope of finally turning the page on Brexit, given the need to focus the EU's efforts on the many other priorities on its agenda;
- the need to restore confidence in Northern Ireland and for its Legislative Assembly to start operating again as normal;
- the considerable advantages for Northern Ireland of access to the markets of both the UK and the EU;
- the crucial need to take account of Ireland's interests throughout the discussions and to reiterate that Ireland should not suffer the consequences of the UK's withdrawal from the EU;
- recognition of the fact that while the UK was a key partner for the EU in many areas – especially on the geopolitical front – it was also a direct competitor of the EU where international trade was concerned;

- a call, in this context, to relaunch the EU's trade ambitions and conclude the free trade agreements that were eagerly anticipated by its global partners, in particular the Mercosur agreement;
- the observation that the Commission had received hundreds of letters from universities and researchers concerning the UK's participation in the Horizon Europe programme;
- the need, in this connection, to bear in mind the transition measures implemented by the EU since 2021 to allow British researchers to apply for the Horizon Programme pending an agreement being reached with the UK, while at the same time linking the financing to the situation's resolution;
- the positive impact of improved relations, as exemplified by the conclusion of proceedings launched against the UK by the European Anti-Fraud Office concerning undervaluation of textile imports, where the UK had recently accepted a judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Union and had finally agreed to pay almost three billion euro in customs duties;
- the hope too of progress on the PEACE PLUS programme, which was supporting peace and reconciliation between the border counties of Ireland and Northern Ireland, and which was currently waiting for a financing agreement to be concluded by the UK.

The Commission took note of this information.

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The meeting closed at 10.12.