



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

SECRETARIAT-GENERAL

PV(2024) 2488 final

- English translation of the French version which is authentic –

Strasbourg, 23 April 2024

TEXTE EN

MINUTES

**of the 2488th meeting of the Commission
held in Brussels
(Berlaymont)
on Wednesday 27 March 2024
(morning)**

PV(2024) 2488 final

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Single sitting: Wednesday 27 March 2024 (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 DOMBROVSKIS	Executive Vice-President	
Mr ŠEFČOVIČ	Executive Vice-President	
Mr BORRELL i FONTELLES	High Representative / Vice-President	
Ms ŠUICA	Vice-President	
Mr SCHINAS	Vice-President	
Mr HAHN	Member	
Mr SCHMIT	Member	Items 1 to 9/11
Mr GENTILONI	Member	
Mr WOJCIECHOWSKI	Member	
Mr BRETON	Member	
Ms FERREIRA	Member	
Ms KYRIAKIDES	Member	Items 1 to 8 (in part)
Mr REYNDERS	Member	
Ms DALLI	Member	
Mr LENARČIČ	Member	
Ms VÁLEAN	Member	Items 8 to 12
Ms URPILAINEN	Member	
Ms SIMSON	Member	
Mr SINKEVIČIUS	Member	Items 1 to 8 (in part)
Ms McGUINNESS	Member	
Ms IVANOVA	Member	
Mr HOEKSTRA	Member	

Absent:

Ms JOUROVÁ	Vice-President
Ms JOHANSSON	Member
Mr VÁRHELYI	Member

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

Ms CONSTANTIN	Deputy Head of Cabinet to Ms JOUROVÁ	
Mr ROSSIDES	Head of Cabinet to for Ms KYRIAKIDES	Items 8 to 12 (in part)
Ms WEBBER	Head of Cabinet to for Ms JOHANSSON	
Mr KRISTÓFFI	Head of Cabinet to for Mr VÁRHELYI	

The following also sat in:

Mr SEIBERT	Head of Cabinet to the PRESIDENT	
Mr LADENBURGER	Deputy Director-General, Legal Service	
Mr MAMER	Head of the Spokesperson's Service and Chief Spokesperson of the Commission	
Ms PODESTA	Deputy Chief Spokesperson of the Commission	
Mr WHELAN	Adviser in the PRESIDENT's cabinet	Item 8
Ms ALLOUIS-LE LOSTEC	Head of Unit in the Secretariat-General	
Mr CHARLES	Secretariat-General	

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

1. AGENDAS

(OJ(2024) 2488/FINAL; SEC(2024) 2488/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(2024) 2488)

The Commission considered the Secretary-General's report on the weekly meeting of Heads of Cabinet held on Monday 25 March 2024.

3. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES

The Commission decided to hold over approval of the minutes of its 2484th, 2485th, 2486th and 2487th meetings of 27 February and 5, 12 and 20 March 2024 until a later meeting.

4. INTERINSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS

(RCC(2024) 83)

The Commission took note of the record of the meeting of the Interinstitutional Relations Group (GRI) held on Friday 22 March 2024 (RCC(2024) 83).

The Commission approved the lines proposed for the following points:

- **Commission Work Programme 2024: withdrawal of pending proposals; withdrawal of the Commission proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the sustainable use of plant protection products and amending Regulation (EU) 2021/2115**

(COM(2022) 305 final – 2022/0196 (COD)); publication of the list in the Official Journal

Line set out in SPI(2024) 15.

- **Packaging and packaging waste, amendment of Regulation (EU) 2019/1020 and Directive (EU) 2019/904, and repeal of Directive 94/62/EC (Regulation) – RIES report – 2022/0396 (COD)**

Line set out in SI(2024) 169/3.

- **Proposal for an interinstitutional ethics body – Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Court of Justice, the European Central Bank, the European Court of Auditors, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – COM(2023) 311 final**

Line set out in SI(2024) 182.

- **Temporary trade liberalisation measures supplementing trade concessions applicable to Ukrainian products under the Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and Ukraine, of the other part (Regulation) – KALNIETE report – 2024/0028 (COD)**

Line set out in SI(2024) 199.

- **Single European Sky:**
 - **Implementation of the Single European Sky (recast – Regulation) – MARINESCU report – 2013/0186 (COD)**
 - **Amendment of Regulation (EU) 2018/1139 as regards the capacity of the European Union Aviation Safety Agency to act as Performance Review Body of the Single European Sky (Regulation) – LIBERADZKI report –**

2020/0264 (COD)

Line set out in SI(2024) 201.

- **Amendment of Regulation (EU) 2024/257 fixing for 2024, 2025 and 2026 the fishing opportunities for certain fish stocks, applicable in Union waters and, for Union fishing vessels, in certain non-Union waters (Council Regulation) – 2024/0063 (NLE)**

Line set out in SI(2024) 193.

- **Solar Energy Charter**

Line set out in SI(2024) 197.

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-sessions of November II 2023 and December 2023, and January I and February I 2024**

Line set out in SP(2024) 220/4.

**5. COORDINATION OF EXTERNAL ACTION
(RCC(2024) 14)**

The Commission took note of the operational conclusions in RCC(2024) 14 of the meeting of the Group for External Coordination (EXCO) held on Wednesday 20 March 2024.

6. WRITTEN PROCEDURES, EMPOWERMENT AND DELEGATION OF POWERS

6.1. WRITTEN PROCEDURES APPROVED

(SEC(2024) 98 ET SEQ.)

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted between 18 and 24 March 2024.

6.2. EMPOWERMENT

(SEC(2024) 99 ET SEQ.)

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted between 18 and 24 March 2024.

6.3. DELEGATION / SUBDELEGATION OF POWERS

(SEC(2024) 100 ET SEQ.)

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted under the delegation and subdelegation procedures between 18 and 24 March 2024 archived in Decide.

6.4. SIGNIFICANT WRITTEN PROCEDURES

(SEC(2024) 101 AND /2)

The Commission took note of the significant written procedures for which the time limit expired between 25 March and 5 April 2024.

7. ADMINISTRATIVE AND BUDGETARY MATTERS

(SEC(2024) 102 AND /2)

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

(PERS(2024) 32 AND /2)

During the meeting, Mr HAHN presented three additional proposals for administrative decisions, which were submitted directly to the College for approval.

It was therefore proposed to transfer, in the interest of the service, under Article 7 of the Staff Regulations, Mr Stephen QUEST – currently Director-General of the Joint Research Centre – to the post of Director-General of DG Human Resources and Security, and Mr Mario NAVA – currently Director-General of DG Structural Reform Support – to the post of Director-General of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. It was also proposed to authorise the internal and interinstitutional publication at grade AD15/16, and external publication at grade AD15, of the vacancy notice for the post of Director-General of DG Migration and Home Affairs.

Mr HAHN highlighted the great skills, outstanding career and recognised expertise of Mr QUEST and Mr NAVA, and congratulated them on their appointments.

7.1. DG HUMAN RESOURCES AND SECURITY – TRANSFER OF AN AD16 OFFICIAL UNDER ARTICLE 7 OF THE STAFF REGULATIONS

On a proposal from Mr HAHN, in agreement with the PRESIDENT, and after consulting Ms IVANOVA, the Commission decided to transfer in the interest of the service, under Article 7 of the Staff Regulations, Mr Stephen QUEST, currently Director-General of the Joint Research Centre, to the post of Director-General of DG Human Resources and Security.

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

**7.2. DG EMPLOYMENT, SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND INCLUSION –
TRANSFER OF AN AD15 OFFICIAL UNDER ARTICLE 7 OF THE
STAFF REGULATIONS**

On a proposal from Mr HAHN, in agreement with the PRESIDENT, and after consulting Ms FERREIRA and Mr SCHMIT, the Commission decided to transfer in the interest of the service, under Article 7 of the Staff Regulations, Mr Mario NAVA, currently Director-General of DG Structural Reform Support, to the post of Director-General of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.

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

**7.3. DG MIGRATION AND HOME AFFAIRS – AUTHORISATION FOR
THE INTERNAL AND INTERINSTITUTIONAL PUBLICATION AT
GRADE AD15/16, AND EXTERNAL PUBLICATION AT GRADE AD15,
OF A DIRECTOR-GENERAL POST
(PERS(2024) 37)**

On a proposal from Mr HAHN, in agreement with the PRESIDENT, and after consulting Ms JOHANSSON, 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(2024) 37 for the post of Director-General of DG Migration and Home Affairs, in accordance with Article 29(1)(a)(i) and (iii), (1)(b) and (2) of the Staff Regulations.

This decision would take effect immediately.

**7.4. DG MOBILITY AND TRANSPORT – ADOPTION OF A LIST OF
CANDIDATES FOR THE POST OF EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE
EUROPE'S RAIL JOINT UNDERTAKING (EU-RAIL), AT GRADE AD14
(PERS(2024) 33 TO /3)**

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

- to approve the list of three candidates, presented in alphabetical order, set out in point 1 of PERS(2024) 32, for the post of Executive Director of the Europe’s Rail Joint Undertaking in Brussels and to consider this list as the Commission proposal;
- to ask Ms VĂLEAN, the Member of the Commission responsible, to communicate this decision to the Governing Board of the Europe’s Rail Joint Undertaking.

These decisions would take effect immediately.

**7.5. DG AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT –
AUTHORISATION FOR THE INTERNAL AND
INTERINSTITUTIONAL PUBLICATION AT GRADE AD14/15, AND
EXTERNAL PUBLICATION AT GRADE AD14, OF A DIRECTOR POST
(PERS(2024) 34)**

On a proposal from Mr HAHN, in agreement with the PRESIDENT, and after consulting Mr WOJCIECHOWSKI, the Commission decided to authorise the internal and interinstitutional publication, at grade AD14/15, and external publication, at grade AD14, of the vacancy notice in PERS(2024) 34 for the post of Director of the ‘Sustainability’ Directorate in DG Agriculture and Rural Development, in accordance with Article 29(1)(a)(i) and (iii), (1)(b) and (2) of the Staff Regulations.

This decision would take effect immediately.

**7.6. DG NEIGHBOURHOOD AND ENLARGEMENT NEGOTIATIONS –
APPOINTMENT OF A PRINCIPAL ADVISER AT GRADE AD14/15
(PERS(2024) 36 TO /3)**

The Commission had before it applications under Article 29(1)(a)(i) and (iii) of the Staff Regulations for the post of Principal Adviser for Reconstruction in Gaza in DG Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (PERS(2024) 36).

It took note of the opinions of the Consultative Committee on Appointments of 5 and 7 March 2024 (PERS(2024) 36/2 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 VÁRHELYI, it then decided to appoint Ms Henrike TRAUTMANN to the post.

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

7.7. DG HUMAN RESOURCES AND SECURITY – APPROVAL OF LISTS OF CANDIDATES FOR POSTS OF HEAD OF EU DELEGATION AND DEPUTY HEAD OF EU DELEGATION AT GRADES AD14-15/AD14 AND AD9-14/AD12
(PERS(2024) 35)

The Commission took note of the information in point 3 of PERS(2024) 32 and, on a proposal from Mr HAHN, in agreement with the PRESIDENT, decided to approve the lists of candidates submitted to it for posts of Head of EU Delegation and Deputy Head of EU Delegation in the following countries:

HEADS OF DELEGATION

- Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Egypt, Kosovo, Mexico, Türkiye and United Nations organisations in Geneva (AD14-15/AD14);
- Algeria, Bangladesh, Benin, Bolivia, Central African Republic, Chad, Chile, Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Ecuador, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Haiti, Honduras, Hong Kong, Iceland, Jamaica, Kazakhstan, Laos, Malaysia,

Mali, Mauritania, Mongolia, Montenegro, Nigeria, North Macedonia, Peru, Philippines, Sierra Leone, Switzerland, Syria, Taiwan, Togo, Tunisia, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, and to the Holy See / the Order of Malta / United Nations organisations in Rome (AD9-14/AD12).

DEPUTY HEADS OF DELEGATION

- Canada, India, Japan, Lebanon, Pacific region/Fiji, United Kingdom, United States of America, office in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and to the African Union in Ethiopia and organisations of the United Nations and World Trade Organization in Geneva (AD9-14/AD12).

CHARGÉ D’AFFAIRES

- Afghanistan (AD9-14/AD12).

The competent authority of the European External Action Service would make the final appointments on the basis of these lists, as set out in PERS(2024) 35.

These decisions would take effect immediately.

**8. COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS ON THE 9TH COHESION REPORT
(COM(2024) 149 AND /2; SWD(2024) 79; RCC(2024) 89)**

Mr DOMBROVSKIS briefly presented the Communication, which provided a periodic review of cohesion policy covering the previous three years, in accordance with the provisions of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). He stressed the importance of this exercise given the objectives of cohesion policy, the amount of funding involved and the complexity of a context

affected in recent years by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

He explained that the Communication offered an in-depth analysis of the achievements of cohesion policy and its synergies with other EU policies. It also contained a forward-looking reflection on the objectives and delivery mechanisms of cohesion policy in the light of the main challenges facing the EU in the medium and long term. In this context, Mr DOMBROVSKIS mentioned demographic challenges, in particular population ageing, and regional disparities, which were likely to be exacerbated by a digital divide both within European society as a whole and between the various regions.

He pointed out that, although it had been conceived as a medium-term policy instrument with a seven-year programming cycle, cohesion policy had proved to be flexible enough to respond to sudden crises and shocks. In this regard, he highlighted the contribution of the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative (CRII), Supporting Affordable Energy (SAFE) and Cohesion's Action for Refugees in Europe (CARE) to addressing the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In these crisis situations, regional and local authorities had been directly involved in the mitigation measures put in place, and their increased administrative capacity was often a consequence of their participation in cohesion projects.

In conclusion, Mr DOMBROVSKIS considered that cohesion policy had shown a high degree of flexibility while staying true to its fundamental principles, namely place-based policies, multi-level governance and shared management. He felt that, in future, it would need to draw lessons from other EU funding instruments, such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility, to help it adapt to emerging needs.

Ms FERREIRA reminded the College of the requirement, enshrined in the European Treaties, to present a report every three years on the state of economic,

social and territorial cohesion in the EU. That day's Communication summarised the analysis contained in the ninth such report and drew lessons for the future.

The Treaty on the Functioning of the EU explicitly recognised the importance of cohesion, noting that disparities in development led to economic inefficiencies and that reducing them therefore benefited the EU as a whole. Although the Single Market, economic and monetary integration and enlargement offered significant benefits, market forces impacted the economy asymmetrically and did not, on their own, guarantee a fair distribution of these benefits between people and regions. It was therefore necessary to put in place a cohesion policy that supported the development of all the EU's regions, exploiting their full potential and thereby strengthening the Single Market and internal EU value chains.

In this regard, Ms FERREIRA highlighted the remarkable successes of cohesion policy. Twenty years after the 2004 enlargement, the average gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in the Member States that joined the Union in that year had increased from around 52% of the EU average in 2004 to almost 80% in 2023. According to the Commission's macroeconomic models, cohesion policy funding in the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 periods was expected to increase EU GDP by 0.9% by 2030, with an even greater impact in cohesion countries receiving larger amounts of funding. Croatia's GDP was expected to increase by 8% by 2030 thanks to cohesion policy investments, with Poland's and Slovakia's expected to increase by 6% and Lithuania's by 5% over the same period. Each euro invested in 2014-2020 was expected to generate 1.3 euros in 2030.

Overall, cohesion policy was responsible for 13% of public investment in the EU as a whole, and for 51% in less developed EU countries. It had contributed to improving energy performance in 550 000 households, supported 4.4 million businesses, improved health services for 63 million people, protected 17 million people from floods and provided high-speed internet connection to almost 8 million households.

However, Ms FERREIRA pointed out that it was important to continue efforts to reduce internal disparities and to overcome the stagnation, or even decline, of certain regions. She highlighted the contrast between the capital regions of the Eastern EU Member States, which were experiencing rapid growth and high levels of GDP per capita, and other regions in these countries, which were lagging behind. With regard to Southern and Western Europe, she noted that the poorest regions had experienced weak economic growth, a trend which had intensified after the 2008 financial crisis.

Without intervention, structural changes might exacerbate these disparities and impact the most vulnerable regions negatively. Ms FERREIRA referred in particular to the challenges posed by demographic change, the green and digital transitions and the changing geopolitical context, which required targeted policy responses. As an example, she mentioned that, according to the Commission's estimates, the Mediterranean and South-Eastern regions, which were already poorer than the EU average, would be worst affected by the consequences of global warming.

On the basis of these observations and analyses, Ms FERREIRA outlined the main conclusions from the report and presented some lessons to be learned to guide the future of cohesion policy.

First, she stressed the existence of different starting points and development trajectories, emphasising the great diversity of regional development profiles, needs and resources. This variety implied that current trends and transitions affected each region differently, creating a need for cohesion policy support to be tailored more closely to regional specificities.

Ms FERREIRA also considered it crucial to continue reducing disparities. Although cohesion policy support had traditionally focused on less developed regions, the emergence of new challenges, such as stagnation or decline in certain regions, required more attention in order to identify and address these emerging dynamics before they worsened.

A third lesson was the need for balanced territorial development. Ms FERREIRA emphasised the increase in internal disparities within the Member States, with growth and investment concentrated in large urban areas while other regions were struggling to keep up. She stressed the importance of polycentric economic development to correct these imbalances, highlighting the potential role of small and medium-sized cities in creating opportunities and providing services to rural and less urbanised areas.

She further highlighted the key role of governance and administrative capacity in the effective design and implementation of any development strategy, including cohesion policy. An in-depth reflection was needed on how to boost these capacities, which were essential not only to strengthen cohesion policy but also to foster trade within the Single Market.

Ms FERREIRA then stressed the need to involve stakeholders and civil society, who had a better understanding of their specific needs, and suggested exploring ways of increasing their capacity to participate in the design and implementation of programmes.

She highlighted the importance of establishing a closer link between cohesion policy and the reforms needed for economic development. Cohesion policy was already linked to the European Semester and included enabling conditions for certain structural reforms, and she stressed the need to strengthen this link while also drawing lessons from the Recovery and Resilience Facility.

She also believed that there was scope to make the implementation of cohesion policy even more effective. Although it had already been through a simplification process, there were further opportunities for improvement, in particular by drawing inspiration from performance-based instruments. However, Ms FERREIRA stressed the importance of preserving a place-based approach to achieving the objectives.

In parallel, the flexibility of cohesion policy could be enhanced. While it had always been possible to adjust the programmes, recent crises had led to changes in cohesion

policy to make such adjustments easier. Ms FERREIRA proposed exploring ways to allow greater flexibility without compromising the long-term structural focus of cohesion policy.

Finally, she stressed the importance of improving coordination and integrating the territorial dimension into other EU policies to ensure greater coherence. She pointed out that promoting the economic development of all regions should not be a matter for cohesion policy alone, but should be a shared objective of all national and European policies.

Ms FERREIRA concluded her presentation by stressing that, while the design of cohesion policy might change, its *raison d'être* remained more relevant than ever, particularly in the context of a possible further enlargement of the EU.

Mr SCHMIT noted that there was broad consensus on the crucial role of cohesion policy for achieving the Porto targets on employment, skills and poverty reduction. He highlighted in particular the contribution of the European Social Fund to implementing European social and employment policies: for the period 2021-2027, EUR 65 billion from the Fund had been allocated to skills development, EUR 23 billion to combat youth unemployment and EUR 6 billion to reduce child poverty.

He welcomed the significant progress achieved through these investments, in particular a narrowing of the gap in employment rates between regions, a fall in the unemployment rate in less developed regions, including among young people, and the downward convergence of poverty rates. Cohesion policy had also supported the post-COVID-19 recovery and helped address the social consequences of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

Nonetheless, there were still challenges to be faced, such as persistent regional disparities and a youth unemployment rate that was 2.5 times higher than the general unemployment rate. Moreover, the EU was still far away from achieving its skills and poverty reduction targets. In a situation of growing labour shortages, it

was paramount to tackle these issues, both for the EU's competitiveness and for its social cohesion.

His recommendation for the future was to build on the strengths of cohesion policy while tackling its weaknesses. It was particularly important to follow a bottom-up approach at regional and sometimes sub-regional level and to embed cohesion policy into the European Semester process. As for the areas for improvement, he called for the simplification of cohesion policy, stronger links with structural reforms and a better balance between long-term goals and the capacity to respond nimbly to new challenges.

Lastly, Mr SCHMIT stressed the importance of giving further thought to the future of cohesion policy and of guaranteeing the systematic involvement of partners and stakeholders at all stages of its implementation.

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

- full support for the report as an excellent means of presenting the development of cohesion policy and its contribution to the well-being of European citizens;
- the considerable impact that climate and demographic change could have on the regions of Europe and, in this context, the importance of a policy focused on these new structural challenges;
- the special attention to be paid to rural areas and to regions with specific geographical disadvantages, in particular to overcome problems arising from a lack of means of communication, which could lead to the exclusion of the population of these regions;
- the crucial contribution of cohesion policy after past enlargements and its role as an essential pillar of European integration;

- the faltering progress in reducing the gender pay gap, poverty in marginalised communities such as the Roma and barriers to the inclusion of persons with disabilities;
- the need to bolster administrative capacity in many Member States, in order to ensure the proper use of funds and the effectiveness of cohesion policy;
- appreciation of having this progress report on achievement of the Porto targets on employment, skills and poverty reduction by 2030;
- the importance of understanding why cohesion policy worked better in some regions than in others, which strands of cohesion policy were most effective, and to which priority objectives the relevant investments should be directed;
- the role of cohesion policy in boosting the EU's innovation and global competitiveness by focusing on bringing scientific results to market and exploring synergies between cohesion and Horizon Europe funding in order to improve its effectiveness;
- the relevance of using cohesion policy funds to direct future policies in all EU regions in a flexible way, building on the success of the Recovery and Resilience Facility;
- the need for strong communication on the results of cohesion policy and the opportunities for the younger generations.

In response to some of the points raised, Ms FERREIRA pointed out that the proportion of the European population living in a country where GDP was below 75% of the EU average had fallen from 25% to 5% since 2000, which confirmed the reduction in disparities between EU Member States. The divergences within each Member State had also decreased, but there was still significant room for improvement at that level.

As regards innovation, she felt that investments from both cohesion policy and other EU policies should provide added value in all regions, while being adapted to each region's specific needs and capacities. She ended by saying that it was vital to ensure that governance of cohesion policy remained both inclusive and flexible, and to promote synergy between the various instruments in order to encourage greater convergence within the Union.

The PRESIDENT wound up the debate by stressing the importance of comparing dynamic developments in the various regions, while taking account of each region's different starting point. She referred to the analysis carried out at the last Euro Summit, which had highlighted the EU's remarkable performance in various sectors, including in comparison to the United States and China. As an example, she cited the positive record in terms of life expectancy, access to health services, economic and social stability, the reduction of income inequality, mobility and the cutting of CO₂ emissions.

Although the EU's GDP per capita remained lower than that of the United States, in particular because of the slower spread of technology and a capital market that was still fragmented, she highlighted the EU's success in recovering from the pandemic. This had been possible thanks to targeted investments made at the time when they were most needed, in particular through the European instrument for temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) and NextGenerationEU, which had supported the labour market and minimised the negative impact. The PRESIDENT felt that it would be useful to draw inspiration from this experience in order to identify the areas where cohesion policy investments had proved most productive.

Following these presentations, the Commission approved the Communication in COM(2024) 149/2 for transmission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions and, for information, to the national parliaments, together with the staff working document distributed as SWD(2024) 79, 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 - A BLUEPRINT FOR A EUROPEAN DEGREE**
(SEC(2024) 144 AND /2; SWD(2024) 74; RCC(2024) 87)
10. **PROPOSAL FOR A COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION ON A EUROPEAN QUALITY ASSURANCE AND RECOGNITION SYSTEM IN HIGHER EDUCATION**
(SEC(2024) 147 AND /2; SWD(2024) 74; RCC(2024) 87)
11. **PROPOSAL FOR A COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION ON ATTRACTIVE AND SUSTAINABLE CAREERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**
(COM(2024) 145 AND /2; SWD(2024) 74; RCC(2024) 87)

Mr SCHINAS stated that the package of measures proposed that day was the final component of the European Education Area, announced by the Commission in 2020, and emphasised the significant progress that had been made since then. He highlighted the parallel with the health sector, where, despite the legal constraints of the EU's competences, significant progress had been made in transnational cooperation during this term of office.

In particular, there had been an unprecedented increase in funding for the Erasmus+ programme, whose budget for the period from 2021 to 2027 had doubled compared to the previous period, despite the budgetary constraints of the Multiannual Financial Framework. He also welcomed the success of the European Universities Alliances, which were now bringing together almost 500 higher education and university institutions in 60 alliances, or 10% of EU universities.

Mr SCHINAS saw the introduction of the necessary conditions for the creation of a joint European degree as another essential step in the development of the European Education Area. The benefits envisaged were multiple, ranging from increasing the EU's attractiveness for students from all over the world to promoting

a shared European identity. He highlighted the enthusiasm for this joint project among stakeholders who were anticipating positive spill-over effects for Member States, regions, higher education and university institutions, their staff and students.

The aim was to remove the barriers currently limiting the capacity of European universities to step up their international collaboration for the award of a joint degree. Higher education systems in the EU remained characterised by their diversity, despite the efforts to harmonise via the Bologna process. To overcome these obstacles, a two-speed approach was proposed: on the one hand, a European label could be awarded to existing courses fulfilling certain conditions; on the other hand, universities could work together from the outset to develop new European degrees in specific fields.

Mr SCHINAS pointed out that the choice of criteria for the European degree would be left to the Member States, noting that the initiative's aim was to foster an enabling environment to facilitate its development at national level. He ended by expressing his pride in this flagship initiative, which could become as iconic and recognised within 20 years as other European symbols such as Erasmus, the Schengen area or even the euro.

Ms IVANOVA confirmed that this package was a major turning point in response to the need for quality transnational education in the face of increasingly global challenges. These measures met the expectations of European citizens, universities and future employers, as demonstrated by the enthusiastic welcome they had received. Their aim was to make European higher education more competitive and interconnected, thereby consolidating the EU's position in the global race for talent, which would ultimately boost Europe's global competitiveness.

The package had three interlinked components, namely a Communication and two proposals for Council Recommendations, all of which were essential for the successful roll-out of a European degree.

The Communication provided a pathway for Member States to set up a joint degree at Bachelor's, Master's or Doctoral level. The pathway identified the legal and administrative obstacles that currently hampered the ability of higher education institutions to offer cross-border degrees, such as the time needed to accredit new programmes, and suggested solutions to overcome these difficulties.

The award of the European degree, whether at national, regional or institutional level, would not require new structures. The added value of this proposal stemmed from the definition of common criteria by the Member States. These standards had been tested through important pilot programmes and fine-tuned through extensive consultations over the last two years.

Ms IVANOVA also emphasised that the implementation of the European degree was voluntary and that it represented an alternative for universities interested in collaboration, while supporting student mobility in Europe. The staged approach being proposed would allow Member States to move forward at their own pace, regardless of their starting point.

She then turned to the proposal for a Council Recommendation to establish a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education. She highlighted the length, complexity and high cost of current quality assurance procedures for transnational programmes, which were essential to build trust in the value of degrees both between academic institutions and with employers. It was also a necessary precondition for automatic recognition of qualifications and learning credits, which was crucial for students aiming to study abroad.

Finally, the package's third component was a proposal for a Council Recommendation on promoting attractive and sustainable careers in higher education. The aim was to ensure that the higher education sector attracted and retained academic talent, ensuring that their commitment to international cooperation in education and innovative teaching methods was suitably recognised and rewarded.

Ms IVANOVA ended by expressing her gratitude to the PRESIDENT, who had committed in her political guidelines at the beginning of her term of office to making the European Education Area a reality, and welcomed the significant contribution of the measures presented that day to achieving this goal.

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

- the symbolic importance of a European degree, which was particularly important for citizens, especially young people, and the added value of the European Union which this diploma epitomised;
- a reminder of the historic global reputation of many European universities, and the major added value that education represented for Europe;
- in the context of the European Year of Skills, the relevance and desirability of such initiatives contributing to enriching the skills of Europe’s workforce;
- the importance attached to education in the Conference on the Future of Europe and subsequent citizens’ panels, including a dedicated panel on learning mobility;
- the desirability of encouraging educational mobility at all levels, including in the field of vocational education and training, in the form of an ‘Erasmus for apprentices’;
- recognition of the national character of educational competences, which justified the proposed scheme’s strictly voluntary nature;
- the need for Member States to actively combat the fragmented educational landscape in the EU and devote all the necessary means to this.

The PRESIDENT concluded by stressing the importance of actively promoting the European degree and stimulating the interest of students, in order to create a positive dynamic in the Member States.

Following these presentations, the Commission:

- approved the Communication in COM(2024) 144/2 for transmission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, and, for information, to the national parliaments, together with the staff working document distributed as SWD(2024) 74, the contents of which were noted;
- adopted the proposal for a Recommendation in COM(2024) 147/2 for transmission to the Council and, for information, to the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the national parliaments, together with the staff working document distributed as SWD(2024) 74, the contents of which were noted;
- adopted the proposal for a Recommendation in COM(2024) 145/2 for transmission to the Council and, for information, to the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the national parliaments, together with the staff working document distributed as SWD(2024) 74, the contents of which were noted.

12. OTHER BUSINESS

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN EXTERNAL RELATIONS

Mr BORRELL reviewed the latest developments in external relations, turning first to the fall-out from the terrorist attack in Moscow on 22 March, for which the Islamic State had claimed responsibility. He predicted that Russia would increase its

attacks on Ukraine, wrongfully associated with the Moscow attack, intensify repression at home, and leverage counter-terrorism cooperation internationally.

There was a need to firmly refute Russian allegations and mobilise all available means to step up military support for Ukraine, including the provision of critical equipment such as batteries for the Ukrainian air defence system. A joint meeting of EU Defence and Foreign Affairs Ministers was scheduled for the next Foreign Affairs Council, however action might need to be taken before then should the situation deteriorate.

Mr BORRELL then referred to the resolution recently adopted by the UN Security Council demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza for the month of Ramadan, respected by all parties, and leading to a lasting sustainable ceasefire, and also demanding the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages. The resolution had been adopted with 14 votes in favour, none against and one abstention.

He went on to highlight the crucial importance of continued support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). He welcomed the significant financing granted by Saudi Arabia, which would probably be joined by other Arab countries. The independent review group tasked with assessing the neutrality of UNRWA had submitted its interim report to UN Secretary-General António Guterres; it had identified certain critical areas requiring urgent attention.

Turning to the recent elections in Senegal, Mr BORRELL reported that the opposition candidate, Mr Bassirou Diomaye Faye, had won the first round. This outcome opened a new chapter for Senegal following two terms of Mr Macky Sall. The new President was quite young (44 years of age), in a country where 75% of the population was under 35. This was a remarkable ending for the electoral process considering the upheavals, including an attempt by the outgoing President to postpone the elections. That move had in the end been blocked by the Senegalese

Constitutional Court, demonstrating the robustness of Senegalese institutions and the sense of responsibility of its political leaders.

In Venezuela, however, Mr BORRELL noted that the authorities had not recognised the candidates put forward by the opposition, although they had been elected during the primaries. The Venezuelan opposition was requesting an EU observation mission for the forthcoming elections.

He then briefly addressed the recent partnership agreed with Egypt. He underlined the considerable impact that the EUR 2 billion budget cut would have on the EU's external relations, as regards both third countries and the EU's international image. He shared his concern about the critical situation in Sudan, Ethiopia and the Sahel, where over 600 000 civilians had been killed in the past three years, and he underlined the urgent humanitarian needs in those countries. He called for a significant contribution from the EU, while acknowledging that any support provided would fall far short of the huge needs.

During the ensuing discussion, the Commission highlighted in particular the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza and the fact that the humanitarian aid getting through was insufficient, despite the opening of new air and sea routes.

In reply to some of the points raised, the PRESIDENT acknowledged the need to quickly resolve the financing issue arising from the budget cut. She underlined the seriousness of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, saying that famine was now a reality. She commended, moreover, those striving to improve the situation despite the difficulties, risks and costs involved.

She expressed appreciation to the Cypriot authorities for setting up a sea corridor, which was playing a key role in delivering aid pending the construction of a floating pier by the United States. She also welcomed the vital contribution by the United Arab Emirates which had made ships available to transport aid. Even though these measures were insufficient given the scale of the crisis, the PRESIDENT

considered that they were encouraging, and expressed her great appreciation of them.

At the end of the meeting, Mr REYNDERS informed the College that he was taking part in the selection process for the post of Secretary General of the Council of Europe and that he would soon be taking unpaid leave until after the elections at the end of June.

The Commission took note of this information.

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The meeting closed at 11.21.