



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

SECRETARIAT-GENERAL

PV(2021) 2369 final

- English translation of the French version which is authentic -

Brussels, 24 March 2021

TEXTE EN

MINUTES

of the 2369th meeting of the Commission

held in Brussels

(Berlaymont)

on Wednesday 3 March 2021

(morning)

PV(2021) 2369 final

- English translation of the French version which is authentic -

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Single sitting: Wednesday 3 March 2021 (morning)

The sitting opened at 9.06 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	
Ms ŠUICA	Vice-President	
Mr SCHINAS	Vice-President	
Ms GABRIEL	Member	
Mr SCHMIT	Member	
Mr GENTILONI	Member	
Mr WOJCIECHOWSKI	Member	
Mr BRETON	Member	Items 1 to 11
Ms FERREIRA	Member	
Ms KYRIAKIDES	Member	
Mr REYNDERS	Member	
Ms DALLI	Member	
Ms JOHANSSON	Member	
Mr LENARČIČ	Member	
Ms VÁLEAN	Member	
Mr VÁRHELYI	Member	
Ms URPILAINEN	Member	
Ms SIMSON	Member	
Mr SINKEVIČIUS	Member	
Ms McGUINNESS	Member	

Absent:

Ms JOUROVÁ	Vice-President
Mr HAHN	Member

The following sat in to represent an absent Member of the Commission:

Ms NIKOLAY	Chef de cabinet to Ms JOUROVÁ
Ms JAHNS	Deputy Chef de cabinet to Mr HAHN

The following also sat in:

Mr SEIBERT	Chef de 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 RISO	Deputy Chef de cabinet to the PRESIDENT	Item 8
Ms PETKOVA	Director of Coordination and Administration in the PRESIDENT's Office	
Ms CABRAL	Adviser in the PRESIDENT's Office	Items 9 to 12
Ms MICELI	Policy Coordinator in the PRESIDENT's Office	Item 8
Ms SPINANT	Deputy Chief Spokesperson of the Commission	
Ms ALLOUIS-LE LOSTEC	Head of Unit in the Secretariat-General	

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

1. AGENDAS

(OJ(2021) 2369/FINAL; SEC(2021) 2369/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(2021) 2369)

The Commission considered the Secretary-General's report on the weekly meeting of Chefs de cabinet held on Monday 1 March 2021.

3. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES OF THE 2365TH, 2366TH, 2367TH AND 2368TH COMMISSION MEETINGS (3, 9, 17 AND 24 FEBRUARY 2021)

(PV(2021) 2365; PV(2021) 2365, 2ND PART; PV(2021) 2366; PV(2021) 2366, 2ND PART)

The Commission approved the minutes of its 2365th and 2366th meetings and decided to hold over approval of the minutes of its 2367th and 2368th meetings for a later meeting.

4. INTERINSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS

(RCC(2021) 73)

The Commission took note of the record of the meeting of the Interinstitutional Relations Group (IRG) held by videoconference on Friday 26 February 2021 (RCC(2021) 73).

The Commission approved the lines proposed for the following points:

- **Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 – Public sector loan facility under the Just Transition Mechanism (Regulation) – HAHN & VAN OVERTVELDT report – 2020/0100 (COD)**

Line set out in SI(2021) 60/2.

- **Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 – Common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund, and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and financial rules for those and for the “Asylum and Migration” Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Border Management and Visa Instrument (Regulation) – NOVAKOV & KREHL report – 2018/0196 (COD)**

Line set out in SI(2021) 62/2.

- **Amendment of Council Directive 2011/16/EU on administrative cooperation in the field of taxation (Council Decision) – GIEGOLD report – 2020/0148 (CNS)**

Line set out in SP(2021) 121.

- **Roma equality, inclusion and participation (Council recommendation) – 2020/0288 (NLE)**

Line set out in SI(2021) 63/2.

- **Amendment of Regulation (EU) 2021/XXX as regards certain provisional fishing opportunities for 2021 in Union waters and non-Union waters (Council Regulation) – 2021/0017 (NLE)**

Line set out in SI(2021) 64.

- **Position to be taken on behalf of the European Union in the consultations with the United Kingdom to agree on total allowable catches for 2021 and for certain deep sea stocks for 2021 and 2022 (Council Decision) – 2021/0036 (NLE)**

Line set out in SI(2021) 65/2.

- **Oral question O-000005/2021 – Long-term vision for rural areas**

Line set out in SP(2021) 122/2.

- **Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2021 establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility**

Line set out in SP(2021) 123.

- **Questions from the European Parliament's Committee of Inquiry on the Protection of Animals during Transport (ANIT) to the Commission**

Line set out in SP(2021) 127.

- **Resolutions of the European Parliament under Article 225 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) – Corporate due diligence and corporate accountability – WOLTERS report – 2020/2129 (INL)**

Line set out in SP(2021) 124.

- **European Commission / European Committee of the Regions Partnership on integration – Supporting cities, regions and rural areas in migrants' integration**

Line set out in SP(2021) 8/2.

- **Commission reply to the non-legislative resolutions adopted by Parliament at its November II 2020 part-session**

The Commission approved the line set out in SP(2021) 129/2, and decided to send the document to the European Parliament.

The Commission took note of the following points:

- **Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 – InvestEU Programme (Regulation) – FERNANDES & TINAGLI report – 2020/0108 (COD)**

Compromise text in SP(2021) 102, further to note SI(2021) 477, which the Commission had already approved on 15 December 2020.

- **Programme for the Union's action in the field of health for the period 2021-2027, and repeal of Regulation (EU) No 282/2014 (EU4Health Programme) (Regulation) – BUŞOI report – 2020/0102 (COD)**

Compromise text in SP(2021) 103, further to note SI(2021) 506 already approved by the Commission on 18 December 2020.

- **Amendment of Regulation (EU) 2017/2402 laying down a general framework for securitisation and creating a specific framework for simple, transparent and standardised securitisation to help the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic (Regulation) – TANG report – 2020/0151 (COD) / Amendment of Regulation (EU) No 575/2013 as regards adjustments to the securitisation framework to support the economic recovery in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Regulation) – KARAS report – 2020/0156 (COD)**

Compromise texts in SP(2021) 118 and SP(2021) 119, further to note SI(2021) 490 already approved by the Commission on 15 December 2020.

**5. COORDINATION OF EXTERNAL ACTION
(RCC(2021) 17)**

The Commission took note of the operational conclusions in RCC(2021) 17 of the meeting of the Group for External Coordination (EXCO) held by videoconference on Wednesday 24 February 2021.

6. WRITTEN PROCEDURES, EMPOWERMENT AND DELEGATION OF POWERS

**6.1. WRITTEN PROCEDURES APPROVED
(SEC(2021) 94 ET SEQ.)**

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted between 22 and 26 February 2021.

**6.2. EMPOWERMENT
(SEC(2021) 95 ET SEQ.)**

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted between 22 and 28 February 2021.

**6.3. DELEGATION / SUBDELEGATION OF POWERS
(SEC(2021) 96 ET SEQ.)**

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted under the delegation and subdelegation procedure between 22 and 26 February 2021 archived in Decide.

**6.4. SIGNIFICANT WRITTEN PROCEDURES
(SEC(2021) 97 AND /2)**

The Commission took note of the significant written procedures for which the time limit expired between 1 and 5 March 2021 and of the finalisation written procedures initiated following the weekly meeting of Chefs de cabinet on Monday 1 March 2021.

**7. ADMINISTRATIVE AND BUDGETARY MATTERS
(SEC(2021) 98)**

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

***COMMISSION DECISION ON POST TERM-OF-OFFICE ACTIVITIES OF A
FORMER MEMBER OF THE COMMISSION
(C(2021) 9007)***

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

The Commission adopted the Decision set out in C(2021) 9007.

**8. COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL – ONE
YEAR SINCE THE OUTBREAK OF COVID-19 – FISCAL POLICY
RESPONSE
(COM(2021) 105 TO /3; RCC(2021) 78)**

The PRESIDENT opened the meeting by asking Mr DOMBROVSKIS and Mr GENTILONI to present to the College the Communication entitled ‘One year since the outbreak of COVID-19: fiscal policy response’.

M. DOMBROVSKIS began by saying that when the COVID-19 pandemic had hit Europe exactly a year ago, the EU Member States had had to do everything in their power to offset its devastating economic effects. They had needed maximum flexibility in the application of EU fiscal rules for exceptional spending to support their economies, preserve jobs and keep businesses afloat.

This was the first time that the European Commission had proposed activating the general escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact, and making the State aid rules more flexible. This virtually unprecedented EU policy response was a key part of its strategy to respond quickly, forcefully, and in a coordinated way to the pandemic.

He stressed that this strategy had been successful, since it was estimated that the fiscal and liquidity measures had cushioned the GDP contraction by around 4.5 percentage points in 2020.

Mr DOMBROVSKIS considered that the months ahead would remain difficult and uncertainty was still very high, but that a gradual return to a 'new normal' could be expected from the second half of 2021. Now was therefore the right time to think about the future in terms of the EU's coordinated fiscal policy response.

First, he explained that the Communication being presented that day provided a number of elements to guide EU countries in preparing the Stability and Convergence Programmes they would submit to the Commission in a few weeks' time. The first of these elements related to the general escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact. The Commission proposed that the decision to maintain or suspend this clause should depend on an overall assessment of the state of the economy, using quantitative criteria. The key criterion to use would be whether the level of economic activity in the EU or euro area reached the level seen at the end of 2019. Based on the preliminary indications of the Commission's 2021 winter forecast, the general escape clause would continue to apply in 2022 but would be de-activated in 2023. The final decision on maintaining the clause in 2022 was

expected to be taken in the spring cycle of the European Semester of economic and budgetary policy coordination, after close consultation with the Member States.

He went on to say that the Communication also provided information elements to guide the development of fiscal policies in the period ahead.

He highlighted some of these elements.

First, fiscal support policies must continue to support the economy this year and next, and as long as needed. It was essential not to withdraw it prematurely.

Second, support measures should be timely, temporary and targeted. As the EU exited the crisis phase, the measures should focus increasingly on promoting a resilient and sustainable recovery. In addition, a close eye should be kept on the composition and quality of public finances.

Third, national fiscal policies should take into account the significant impact that the Recovery and Resilience Facility would have in the coming years, without increasing either public deficits or debt levels. The reforms and investments made would also boost potential growth, thereby helping to improve the Member States' fiscal sustainability. He said it was important to make the most of this unique opportunity.

Fourth and lastly, national fiscal policies would need to become gradually differentiated in 2022. Thus, EU countries with low risks in terms of fiscal sustainability should maintain a supportive policy, taking into account the contribution of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), and those countries with high debt levels should pursue more prudent fiscal policies, using RRF grants to fund additional investment.

Mr DOMBROVSKIS felt it was too early to give concrete indications beyond 2022. However, when the time was right, the Member States would have to refocus their budgets to prudent positions in the medium term. Looking to the immediate future, under the spring cycle of the European Semester, the Commission would

incorporate certain quantitative guiding elements for the medium term in its country-specific recommendations.

Once the recovery was under way, the debate on the economic governance framework would be re-launched, taking into account the lessons drawn from the current crisis and the new situation arising from it.

In conclusion, Mr DOMBROVSKIS recommended focusing, for the moment, on the coordination of the EU's political response, and leaving the discussion on its budget rules for a later date.

Mr GENTILONI confirmed that the EU's response to the crisis had been highly successful. The NextGenerationEU recovery plan and the decisions taken in terms of State aid, for example, had served a need. However, the crisis had not yet been overcome and economic growth was slightly negative in the first quarter of this year. The prospect of a strong recovery was expected to materialise in the second quarter or later in the year. Although a number of indicators gave grounds for optimism, some sectors were still in the grip of a deep crisis.

The Communication proposed maintaining fiscal support policies to foster recovery by placing particular emphasis on the green and digital transitions and the need to avoid long-term unemployment and worsening the inequalities between Member States.

Current fiscal and monetary policies should continue to pull in the same direction, in light of the good results achieved in 2020.

He felt it was also necessary to give Member States a certain level of predictability by maintaining the general escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact not only in 2021 but also in 2022, thanks to detailed guidance that would be given to them in May 2021.

Future fiscal recommendations would be more differentiated than in 2020 as they would take account of the pace of the recovery in each Member State and the

underlying fiscal circumstances. These recommendations would comprise certain quantitative elements, while remaining essentially qualitative.

The EU's fiscal rules would subsequently need to be reviewed. This review had been suspended due to the crisis and would resume once the recovery had taken hold.

In conclusion, he noted that the Commission's decision on whether or not to open excessive deficit procedures against the relevant Member States would be announced, where applicable, in the spring cycle of the European Semester.

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

- the balance and timeliness of the Communication, which offered a very good basis for the future debate on the measures needed for the economic recovery and the review of the EU's economic governance;
- the contradiction in calling for measures to combat the pandemic and kick-start the economy on the one hand, while on the other desiring an end to fiscal support measures even though it was still too early;
- the need to think about whether the EU's economic governance rules should be adapted to take into account the changes that had occurred since 1990 and to examine whether current economic and fiscal instruments were still appropriate to meet the challenges of the 21st century;
- the observation that for reasons of fiscal responsibility State aid could not be unlimited, and that it needed to be focused on the necessary measures, with the help of private investment;
- a reminder that the financial burden borne by future generations would depend directly on the quality of the investments decided upon now;

- the welcome acknowledgement in the Communication of employment and, in particular, of the risk of high unemployment, which was seen as a problem from the economic, social and political viewpoints;
- the need to prevent the divergences between Member States that existed before the crisis from returning;
- the absence of alternatives to increasing current public debt to combat the pandemic and finance the recovery, and the need to decide upon common rules to deal with this in a responsible manner;
- the usefulness of learning the lessons of the past, including the fact that the central banks could not resolve the crisis on their own via monetary policy;
- the observation that the banking sector, which was the weak link in the 2009 financial crisis, had not yet fully recovered, hence the importance of examining the impact of non-performing loans;
- the lack of information on the true state of the economy, mainly because of the large number of separate tools mobilised to mitigate the effects of the crisis, which included the temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency (SURE);
- the probability that the coming period would coincide with the start of profound structural changes.

The PRESIDENT wound up the discussion by stating how proud she was of the EU's decision to create the NextGenerationEU recovery fund with its allocation of EUR 750 billion, which would soon be added to the unprecedented amounts mobilised under the structural funds, State aid rules and the SURE instrument to support the Member States in a crisis which was also unprecedented. She felt that the great challenge now was to determine the right approach to pave the way to a steady recovery.

Following these presentations, the Commission approved the Communication in COM(2021) 105/3 for transmission to the Council and, for information, to Parliament and the national parliaments.

**9. COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE, AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS – THE EUROPEAN PILLAR OF SOCIAL RIGHTS ACTION PLAN
(COM(2021) 102 TO /4; SWD(2021) 46 TO /3; RCC(2021) 76)**

**10. COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION ON AN EFFECTIVE ACTIVE SUPPORT TO EMPLOYMENT FOLLOWING THE COVID-19 CRISIS (EASE)
(C(2021) 1372 AND /2; RCC(2021) 76)**

The PRESIDENT presented to the College the measures proposed that day by the Commission in the field of social rights, which included an action plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights and a Commission Recommendation on an effective active support to employment following the COVID-19 crisis (EASE).

She referred to the numerous discussions that had taken place before the action plan was developed, especially on the key targets proposed by the Commission. She referred in particular to the target of ensuring that 78% of people in the 20-64 age group were in employment by 2030. While this was very ambitious, it was nevertheless achievable, as the employment rate for the same age group was 73% in 2019 and the target for 2020 was already 75%. The latter target included an employment rate of 66.6% for women and 78% for men. In any case, significant work remained to be done in order to implement the concrete measures of the action plan in a wide range of areas.

Mr DOMBROVSKIS explained that the aim of the action plan was to promote equal opportunities and access to the labour market, to support quality jobs and fair working conditions, and to strengthen and modernise social protection and inclusion. The impact of the COVID-19 crisis and the introduction of the EU Recovery Plan were fully taken into account, and the action plan built on the numerous measures already taken to implement the Pillar of Social Rights since its proclamation in Gothenburg in 2017. He proposed three objectives for 2030, relating to employment, skills and social protection, accompanied by a revision of the social scoreboard indicators.

He pointed out that the European Semester of economic and budgetary policy coordination would remain the main tool to guide national policies and monitor progress in relation to the Social Pillar. Since responsibility for implementing the action plan was shared between the Member States and the social partners, the Portuguese Council Presidency would ask them to approve a common social agenda at the Social Summit in Porto in May.

He also announced that, in 2021, the Commission would present a number of initiatives that would translate the European Pillar of Social Rights into new proposals: the Child Guarantee, a new framework for Occupational Safety and Health, a platform of collaboration against homelessness, a Communication on promoting decent work worldwide, and an action plan for the social economy. An initiative had already been presented recently for workers on online platforms.

With regard to the recommendation for effective active support for employment following the COVID-19 crisis, Mr DOMBROVSKIS explained that his main objective was to ensure the continuity of the EU's support to Member States to deal with the effects of the pandemic on labour markets, but from a new perspective.

First, it was necessary to move progressively from emergency measures to policies to revive labour markets, maintaining EU support while gradually changing its nature to encourage the transition from generalised short-time work schemes to

labour market measures aimed at boosting job creation, supporting workers between jobs and addressing the lack of skills that were essential for the recovery.

Secondly, the Recovery and Resilience Facility could finance the measures envisaged under the Recommendation to the extent that they were accompanied by appropriate reforms and fulfilled the other eligibility conditions laid down in the Regulation, in particular that they must be temporary, complementary and coordinated with those financed through other EU funds.

The Member States had already been informed of this during bilateral dialogues on their national recovery and resilience plans, which had revealed the need for a new political impetus, hence that day's recommendation.

Mr DOMBROVSKIS noted, in conclusion, that the European instrument for temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency (SURE) would be maintained during the period of implementation of the Recommendation and that once the current second wave of applications for funding had been completed, more than EUR 5 billion would remain available under this instrument.

Mr SCHINAS stressed the historic opportunity to promote professional skills for the green and digital transition through the funding provided for in the EU's recovery strategy. As many as 21 Member States had put education and skills at the core of their recovery efforts. Therefore, he called on everyone to seize this opportunity to initiate a systemic change in the promotion of skills to serve the EU's political objectives.

He highlighted in particular two of the main new features of the action plan, the first being that the EU would now put more emphasis on supporting entrepreneurship rather than wage restraint, and the second one that the burden on the private sector in terms of vocational training would be alleviated.

Mr SCHMIT stressed the importance of reconciling the economic and social dimensions in a sustainable social market economy. He mentioned a Eurobarometer

survey published on 1 March, according to which 88% of the Europeans surveyed in all the Member States said that a social Europe was important for them. He therefore considered it legitimate to integrate the social dimension into all EU policies and to address in particular the two major concerns of citizens, namely working conditions and equal opportunities. He added that the EU needed to communicate more about the European Pillar of Social Rights, of which citizens were still not sufficiently aware.

The action plan proposed concrete measures and set targets for 2030 which were ambitious for some Member States but realistic for others, bearing in mind that increasing the rate of women in the labour market remained a challenge for all. For example, at least 78% of people aged 20-64 should be in employment, at least 60% of adults should participate in training activities every year and the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion should decrease by at least 15 million.

First of all, he emphasised the skills which were essential both for greater equal opportunities in employment and for the socio-economic transformation of the EU. He added that reskilling would be a key element in addressing unemployment.

He then noted that the EU had not achieved its 2018 target to lift 20 million people out of poverty; although the figures for 2019 showed that progress had been made, the COVID-19 crisis was likely to jeopardise progress in the years ahead.

The action plan presented that day was thus a strong political message for the Porto Social Summit in May and for Europeans worried about their jobs and livelihoods. He proposed specific measures for the immediate future, i.e. the recovery, but also for the medium and long term, to address the impact of digitalisation on the world of work and social protection.

Mr SCHMIT also referred to the importance of the Commission Recommendation on an effective active support to employment following the COVID-19 crisis (EASE) in the context of the recovery. He stressed that the objective was to provide support that would stimulate recovery once the crisis was over, seeking to provide

opportunities for everyone, and in particular young people, offer high-quality jobs and revive hope among business owners who had lost their businesses by helping them to rebuild their future.

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

- the timeliness of the European Pillar of Social Rights action plan and the Recommendation on an effective active support to employment, which complemented well the fiscal policy guidelines presented that day;
- the need to prepare for the post-COVID period with differentiated strategies to launch a recovery that would differ depending on the Member State and the ecosystem in question; hence the importance of addressing the social dimension of the recovery;
- the ambitious and challenging nature of the reforms to be implemented in the field of education, pension schemes and the labour market in the context created by the pandemic; the value of the European Semester exercise as a tool to help the Member States as they implemented these reforms, based on their individual situations;
- the support provided by the EU by mobilising the tools at its disposal, in particular by extending the relaxation of fiscal rules;
- the fact that fiscal support measures and the SURE instrument had a cushioning effect on figures relating to business bankruptcies and unemployment;
- the need, nevertheless, for a political debate on the functioning of certain EU fiscal support instruments, for example on the conditions for potentially combining in 2022 the Stability and Growth Pact's general escape clause and the European instrument for temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency (SURE);

- the unique opportunity that would arise in 2022 to link labour market reforms to the future challenges to be met with the twin green and digital transitions;
- the support that the economic recovery, forecast for 2021 and 2022, should provide for the necessary transformation of the EU economy, with average annual growth rates of close to 4% for the EU, not taking into account the recovery plan;
- the fact that quantified targets were an excellent tool to encourage progress, even if the Member States could choose the means of achieving those targets;
- the wish to include lifelong learning and reskilling in the target set whereby 60% of adults should take part in training each year;
- the need to look into ways of developing women's access to the labour market, particularly for women of an immigrant background, thereby creating a virtuous circle that would have a positive impact on the situation of families and on children's level of education, and on society as a whole; the case for promoting entrepreneurship among women;
- the need to include in reflections on social policy the increasingly common situation whereby families were taking care of elderly people in a European society with an ageing population;
- the fact that the European Pillar of Social Rights action plan was a good starting point to use to convince young people and entrepreneurs to launch a business activity and contribute to the recovery; however, a call to refrain from imposing overly restrictive conditions on them;
- the value of guiding the Member States through the pivotal moment of transition from the emergency crisis management phase to the recovery phase using the national Recovery and Resilience Plans, and to help them prepare for the future;

- the fact that the European Semester of economic and budgetary policy coordination was an excellent tool for monitoring employment developments;
- the discussion to be had in order to define the concept of a ‘working age’ population;
- the central importance of education and skills as a means of actively supporting youth employment, and the need to invest in high-quality education;
- the announcement of an upcoming proposal for a European framework for the recognition of training certificates in the context of lifelong learning;
- a reference to the need for reskilling in certain sectors - in the battery sector, for example, it was estimated that 800 000 people would need to reskill by 2025 – and the importance of guiding the Member States, using the national Recovery and Resilience Plans, to put in place upskilling programmes with support from the various tools proposed by the EU;
- the need to encourage investment in green jobs, which had high added value and would contribute to the EU’s technological autonomy and thus to its resilience;
- the observation that the COVID-19 crisis had undermined work-life balance;
- the importance of the upcoming Child Guarantee, which would be set out in a recommendation to be submitted to the College for approval on 24 March, together with the strategy on the rights of the child, as a means of tackling child poverty, with one in five children at risk of poverty in the EU;
- looking ahead to the Porto Summit in May, the recommendation to focus attention on a flagship measure to foster social inclusion and tackle poverty, focusing on children, drawing on the upcoming initiatives on children’s rights and the Child Guarantee, and using all the EU financing instruments and tools that could be mobilised;

- the contribution that EU competition law made to social policy, thanks to lower levels of market concentration among EU firms, in which social partners benefitted from freedom of organisation;
- a call to implement measures to support the cultural and tourism sectors, which often employed low-skilled female workers, to help them recover from the crisis which had hit them hard;
- an invitation to keep in mind, in the recovery strategy, the EU's global competitiveness in an environment that would be greatly changed after the COVID-19 crisis.

The PRESIDENT wrapped up the discussion by thanking Mr DOMBROVSKIS, Mr SCHINAS and Mr SCHMIT for presenting this particularly important file.

Following these presentations, the Commission, on a proposal by the PRESIDENT, confirmed the approval of the Communication and the adoption of the Recommendation in COM(2021) 102/4 and C(2021) 1372/2, respectively, by finalisation written procedure, the deadline for which was set at 9.00 on Thursday 4 March 2021 (PE/2021/1387 and PE/2021/1386).

**11. COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE, AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS – UNION OF EQUALITY – STRATEGY FOR THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES 2021-2030
(COM(2021) 101 AND /2; RCC(2021) 77)**

The PRESIDENT asked Ms DALLI to present the new strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030. The strategy was part of the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the 17th principle of which focused on people

with disabilities. Other principles also addressed the issue of disability. The strategy also marked a new milestone on the path towards the Union of Equality that the current Commission was constantly pursuing, having presented a series of initiatives such as the LGBTIQ equality strategy, the Anti-racism action plan, the Gender equality strategy and the EU Roma strategic framework.

The proposal that day was the result of a long process to build a very tangible social Europe, without leaving anyone behind, and in this case to improve the lives of around 87 million people with disabilities living in Europe, representing almost 20% of the EU population. Specifically, 50% of the over-65s had some form of a physical, mental, intellectual or sensory disability.

The strategy also aimed to implement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, to which both the EU and its Member States were parties.

The process leading to the new strategy had involved taking stock of the previous strategy for the period 2010 to 2020, drawing lessons from it, consulting all relevant stakeholders, involving all Members of the Commission in the work, and taking into account some of the realities revealed by the current pandemic, because people with disabilities were among the hardest hit by the COVID-19 crisis.

Ms DALLI noted that many persons with disabilities still faced obstacles, for example when looking for work or using public transport. Yet persons with disabilities should be able to participate equally in all areas of life. They should be guaranteed the necessary conditions to live independently, learn in an inclusive environment, benefit from appropriate standards at work and participate in political life.

The strategy contributed to this by identifying eight priority areas, which covered all aspects of the UN Convention, thereby seeking to give persons with disabilities greater equality in all areas of everyday life, namely accessibility, free movement,

the full benefit of their rights as EU citizens, independent living and non-discrimination.

Within this framework, the EU was able to promote the rights of persons with disabilities in its global action and commit to mainstreaming disability in its policy-making and funding.

Moreover, as a public administration the Commission had to lead by example. It would take account of the new strategy in its human resources policy, in particular by making its buildings and communications more accessible.

Ms DALLI said that the strategy proposed six flagship initiatives, the contents of which she briefly presented.

First, a European Resource Centre, AccessibleEU, would be launched to provide coherence in accessibility-related measures by facilitating the sharing of professional knowledge and best practices in this field across sectors in order to inspire policy development at national and EU level.

The second initiative was to create a European Disability Card, which would facilitate EU-wide mutual recognition of the status of persons with disabilities, in order to help them enjoy their right of free movement.

Third, to foster independent living and inclusion in the community, the Commission would issue guidance in order to help persons with disabilities to live in accessible housing, with personal assistance, or to continue living at home.

Fourth, a package of measures was planned to improve labour market outcomes for persons with disabilities, by pursuing cooperation with the European Network of Public Employment Services, social partners and organisations representing persons with disabilities. This package would help Member States to implement the relevant employment guidelines in the context of the European Semester of economic and fiscal policy coordination.

Fifth, a platform would be established to replace the current High Level Group on Disability, which would help support the implementation of the European strategy and national disability strategies. It would bring together national focal points under the UN Convention, disability organisations and the Commission.

Sixth and last, the Commission would adopt a renewed human resources strategy aimed at promoting the diversity and inclusion of persons with disabilities within the institution, and would invite the other EU institutions to cooperate more closely on recruitment policy.

Ms DALLI concluded by stressing that if all these measures and flagship initiatives were implemented, the Union would improve the lives of the millions of Europeans living with disabilities.

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

- the College’s broad support for the proposed strategy and appreciation of the fact that its development had involved all the Members of the Commission;
- the quality of the review of the previous strategy, rolled out in the decade from 2010 to 2020;
- the importance of having spelled out the need to integrate a disability dimension into all the Union’s internal and external policies;
- the possibilities at European level of improving the lives of persons with disabilities, even though competences in this field were primarily at national level; for instance, examples of measures taken under the European Consumer Agenda and others that were possible under the Victims’ Rights Directive;
- the value of promoting the political participation of persons with disabilities and making progress in this direction with a view to the next European elections;

- the suggestion whereby the issue of disability would be examined from the perspective of an ageing EU population;
- the recognition of inequalities or different forms of discrimination against persons with disabilities from one Member State to another;
- regret that the COVID-19 pandemic had led to a decline in the living conditions of persons with disabilities;
- the need to ensure that persons with disabilities had a real choice to live independently if they so wished and to encourage the Member States to encourage this freedom of choice, including through financial or even technological means.

The PRESIDENT concluded by stressing the importance of the proposed strategy and thanking Ms DALLI for her presentation.

The Commission approved the Communication in COM(2021) 101/2, 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.

12. PROPOSAL FOR A DIRECTIVE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL TO STRENGTHEN THE APPLICATION OF THE PRINCIPLE OF EQUAL PAY FOR EQUAL WORK OR WORK OF EQUAL VALUE BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN THROUGH PAY TRANSPARENCY AND ENFORCEMENT MECHANISMS (COM(2021) 93 AND /2; SWD(2021) 41; SWD(2021) 42; SEC(2021) 101; RCC(2021) 75)

The PRESIDENT presented the proposal for a Directive to strengthen the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value

between men and women through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms.

With regard to the pay gap of 14% found to exist between men and women, she said that this aggregate figure concealed situations that were even more divergent. For example, some sectors such as health care and construction employed a high proportion of women and men respectively. The problem was therefore much greater in some sectors than that figure alone would appear to suggest.

Ms DALLI shared that opinion. She said that the right to equal pay between women and men for equal work or work of equal value was one of the founding principles of the European Union enshrined by the Treaty of Rome. However, the pay gap between men and women was not solely the result of pay discrimination. Women's careers could suffer from less active periods taking care of children or elderly parents, or from missing out on promotions during maternity leave. Consequently, a comparison of the end-of-career situations of women and men showed that women, owing to their personal situation, received lower pay, which then led to a pension gap between men and women.

She said that the proposal presented that day did not contain any innovative elements; it simply implemented a right enshrined more than sixty years ago in the Treaty of Rome. The proposal for a Directive would strengthen women's economic independence and would continue to affirm the principle of equality by according equal value to the results of women's and men's work. She added that pay transparency was a first – but crucial – step in combating gender-based pay discrimination and segregation. It was not just a matter of closing the current 14% wage gap but also of closing the 30% pension gap between men and women.

Ms DALLI said that in drawing up the proposal, the Commission had sought to adopt a balanced approach and to limit intervention from the European level to what was strictly necessary. The difficulties faced by businesses due to the economic downturn caused by the current pandemic had been taken into account as had their concerns about the impact of the proposal on small and medium-sized enterprises.

At the same time, the crisis had reinforced existing workplace biases and the undervaluation of female work.

The proposal respected the diversity of national models of the relationship between the social partners and collective bargaining that existed in the EU.

She considered that the proposal was proportionate in terms of the efforts required to better implement the principle of equal pay for all workers while minimising the costs and administrative burden imposed on business.

Workers would thus have the right to receive information on the comparison of their pay with the average pay of workers performing the same work or work of equal value, broken down by sex. They would therefore be able to determine whether they might be the victims of discrimination. Furthermore, workers would have more means of access to justice to assert the right to equal pay. These means included in particular procedural rules on access to evidence, the transfer of the burden of proof to the employer, and the right to compensation and other remedies in case of abuse.

Finally, Ms DALLI stressed that the proposed Directive would also introduce the right for gender equality bodies and workers' representatives to pursue collective redress for a number of workers, including before the courts, whether the employer was in the private or public sector. Moreover, employers with at least 250 employees would be required to report annually on any gender pay gap within their organisations, which would help to address issues of equal pay and monitor pay structures in order to ensure fair pay. If the report showed that there was a difference in pay equal to or greater than 5% between women and men in any category of workers, and if that difference could not be justified by gender-neutral objective criteria, employers would be required to carry out a joint assessment of the remuneration with workers' representatives. This joint assessment would identify the reasons for the differences in remuneration and present corrective measures.

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

- broad support for this proposal for a Directive, which was considered timely, necessary and proportionate;
- the lack of tangible progress on equal pay for women and men more than sixty years after the Treaty of Rome which enshrined the right to equal pay as one of the founding principles of the European Union;
- rejection of the argument that pay transparency would contribute negatively to the administrative burden of businesses, which were already suffering as a result of the COVID-19 crisis;
- on the one hand, the reminder that the transparency obligation would apply only to large companies with more than 250 employees and thus to entities with significant human resources services which already held the requested data;
- and on the other hand, the consideration that pay transparency would not be a burden on large companies but instead would help them to recruit better-skilled workers due to the increased attractiveness of jobs;
- the importance of recognising that women's lower pay often led to a lower level of pensions, which in turn put women at greater risk of elderly poverty;
- the important step forward brought about by the transfer of the burden of proof to the defendant in legal proceedings for failure to comply with equal pay for men and women;
- the collegiate approach taken when preparing the initiative.

Following the discussion, the PRESIDENT thanked Ms DALLI for the excellent work done on this important initiative.

The Commission, on a proposal from the PRESIDENT, confirmed the adoption of the proposal for a Directive in COM(2021) 93/2 by finalisation written procedure, the deadline for which was set at 10.00 on Thursday 4 March 2021 (PE/2021/1367).

13. OTHER BUSINESS

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN EXTERNAL RELATIONS

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

Mr BORRELL referred to the follow-up of the Foreign Affairs Council of 22 February, mentioning first of all that the EU had adopted sanctions against four Russian nationals as part of the new EU global human rights sanctions regime introduced on 7 December 2020, which was a first.

He then briefly reported on the political crisis in Armenia and the deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

He also mentioned that the 11th meeting of the EU-Albania Stabilisation and Association Council was held on 1 March. In addition to the questions on the agenda, he announced that the question of increased EU support for Albania's better access to COVID-19 vaccines had been raised.

As regards the next meeting of the European Council on 25 and 26 March, he said that part of the discussions would be devoted to the EU's relations with Turkey and to the EU strategy for the Sahel.

In the context of relations with Turkey, he noted that the United Nations was continuing its efforts to relaunch talks on the situation in Cyprus at a conference to be held in Geneva at the end of April, which the EU would attend as an observer.

Finally, he briefly reviewed the EU leaders' discussions at the European Council of 25 and 26 February on security and defence, on the Strategic Compass and the southern partnership; these discussions would continue at the next Foreign Affairs Council.

He said that at that Council meeting, the ministers would also discuss the situation in Myanmar/Burma and Ethiopia.

A brief discussion followed during which the Commission referred to the recent ruling by the Turkish authorities on returns of refugees from the Greek islands.

The Commission took note of this information.

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The meeting closed at 11.27.