

General Affairs Council

Brussels, 25 January 2022

Chair: Clément Beaune, French Minister of State with responsibility for European Affairs

The meeting will start at 10.00.

A press conference will be held at the end of the meeting, in the early afternoon.

The French presidency will present its priorities for the semester during a public session.

Ministers will hold a policy debate, also in public session, on the 'reinforcing democracy and integrity of elections' legislative package.

The presidency will provide an information point about the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Ministers will take stock of coordination at European Union level in the context of COVID-19.

They will also hold an exchange of views on the state of play of relations between the European Union and the United Kingdom.

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[Press conferences and public events by video streaming](#)

[Video coverage in broadcast quality \(MPEG4\) and photo gallery.](#)

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¹ This note has been drawn up under the responsibility of the press office.

Priorities of the French Presidency

The French presidency will present its priorities for its six-month term during a public session.

[Priorities](#)

‘Democracy and integrity of elections’ package

Ministers will hold a policy debate in public session on the ‘reinforcing democracy and integrity of elections’ legislative package, presented by the Commission on 25 November 2021.

The package contains the following legislative proposals:

- a proposal for a regulation on the transparency of political advertising;
- a proposal for an update of the regulation on the statute and funding of European political parties;
- two proposals for updating the directives on the electoral rights of citizens residing in a Member State of which they are not nationals. In its communication accompanying the package, the Commission announced a joint electoral resilience mechanism.

The aim of this legislative package is to ensure free and fair elections and open public debate, and to make the digital world more responsible, as well as to better protect our democracy and our electoral processes in the face of attempts to interfere with and manipulate information.

The most innovative element is the **regulation on the transparency and targeting of political advertising**. The proposal aims to ‘deal with opaque and non-transparent targeting techniques’. One of its elements is the obligation to make political targeting and amplification techniques more transparent. The new ‘explain or restrict’ principle highlights the rationale behind the new transparency rules: ‘freedom of expression cannot constitute a right to offend’. The aim is to implement the regulation in time for the 2024 European Parliament elections.

The recast of the **regulation on European political parties and political foundations** aims to facilitate the interaction of European political parties with their national member parties and across borders, to increase transparency, in particular as regards political advertising and donations, to cut excessive administrative burden, and to increase the financial viability of European political parties and foundations. Here, too, the aim is to implement the recast in time for the European Parliament elections.

The update of the European Union’s rules on EU citizens residing in a Member State of which they are not nationals – and their right to vote and stand as candidates in European and municipal elections – is also part of this legislative package. The aim is to promote inclusive and equal participation in the 2024 European Parliament elections and in municipal elections across the European Union.

The European Parliament is also expected to adopt a new proposal on the electoral law in the first quarter of 2022.

[Proposal for a regulation on the transparency and targeting of political advertising](#)

[Proposal for a regulation on the statute and funding of European political parties and European political foundations \(recast\)](#)

[Proposal for a directive laying down detailed arrangements for the exercise of the right to vote and stand as a candidate in elections to the European Parliament for Union citizens residing in a Member State of which they are not nationals \(recast\)](#)

[Proposal for a directive laying down detailed arrangements for the exercise of the right to vote and to stand as a candidate in municipal elections by Union citizens residing in a Member State of which they are not nationals \(recast\)](#)

[Protecting election integrity and promoting democratic participation \(communication\)](#)

Conference on the Future of Europe

The presidency will inform the Council about the state of play of the Conference on the Future of Europe, the latest developments and outlook.

An amended timetable has been adopted to take account of delays caused by the public health situation.

In particular, ministers will have the opportunity to exchange views, including on the first sets of recommendations of the European citizens' panels that continue to meet, after the plenary session on 21-22 January.

Subject to the development of the epidemiological situation, the panels are expected to complete their work by the end of February 2022, with plenary sessions in March and April. The French presidency is planning a political conclusion of the exercise by the three joint presidents on 9 May.

The final outcome of the conference will be presented in a report to be submitted by the executive board to the joint presidency (the presidents of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission). The joint declaration commits the three institutions to examine 'swiftly how to follow up effectively to this report, each within its own sphere of competences and in accordance with the Treaties.'

The Council expects the outcome of the conference to be the subject of a report to the European Council in 2022.

The Conference on the Future of Europe is aimed at involving citizens in a wide-ranging debate on Europe's future over the coming decade and beyond, including in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On 10 March 2021, the Council, the European Parliament and the Commission signed a joint declaration that sets out the objectives, structure, scope and timing of the conference. The Conference was formally inaugurated on 9 May 2021 in Strasbourg, following the launch of its digital platform on 19 April 2021. A number of ideas and events have already been posted on the platform.

[Conference on the Future of Europe](#)

COVID-19: coordination at European Union level

Ministers will take stock of coordination at European Union level in the context of COVID-19.

The continued circulation of the Delta variant and the rapid spread of the Omicron variant remain causes for concern. In this context, the vaccination campaigns, including the administration of booster doses, should continue as a matter of urgency. In particular, vaccine hesitancy and disinformation need to be tackled.

The presidency intends to take work forward on the Council Recommendations on travel into and within the Union. The General Affairs Council will be invited to adopt a revised recommendation on travel within the European Union. The discussions on the revision of the recommendation on travel into the European Union from third countries will continue.

Furthermore, on 10 January, agreement was reached under the IPCR to lift the emergency brake activated at the end of November for the seven southern African countries as a result of the emergence of the Omicron variant.

As regards vaccine sharing, in May 2021 the European Council set the target of donating at least 100 million doses by the end of the year. That target was subsequently raised to 250 million doses and Team Europe had met this commitment at the end of 2021. A commitment was then made to share a total of 700 million doses by the middle of 2022. Member States have already delivered more than 255 million vaccine doses worldwide, but vaccine donations and delivery can and need to be accelerated.

[COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic: the EU's response \(background information\)](#)

[COVID-19: travel within the EU \(background information\)](#)

[COVID-19: travel into the EU \(background information\)](#)

EU–UK relations

Ministers will assess the state of play of EU-UK relations.

They will discuss the implementation of the withdrawal agreement, in particular the ongoing talks with the UK to identify practical solutions within the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland to address the difficulties that people in Northern Ireland have been experiencing, and also the persisting divergences regarding the implementation of the agreement on the citizens' rights component.

With regard to the Protocol, on 13 October 2021, the European Commission presented a comprehensive flexibility package to help minimise disruption caused by the withdrawal of the United Kingdom and to help facilitate the everyday life of citizens in Northern Ireland. This followed extensive discussions over the previous months with the UK government, as well as outreach by the European Commission to political leaders, businesses, civil society and other stakeholders in Northern Ireland.

The package is composed of four documents on customs checks, sanitary and phytosanitary issues, supply of medicines and Northern Irish involvement in the governance of the Protocol. Subject to conditions that protect the integrity of the internal market, it proposes to facilitate the flow of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland in respect of goods destined to stay in Northern Ireland. This facilitation is enabled by a series of safeguards and increased market surveillance to ensure the goods do not move into the single market.

Since then, a number of meetings between the European Union and the UK have taken place at technical and political level.

Following these discussions, on 17 December 2021 the Commission presented European Union legislative proposals to ensure the continued long-term supply of medicines from Great Britain to Northern Ireland and to address outstanding supply concerns in Cyprus, Ireland and Malta. These proposals are under discussion in the Council and the European Parliament.

On 13 and 14 January 2022, Commission Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič met with the UK Foreign Secretary, Liz Truss. They agreed that officials would meet this week for in-depth discussions and that they would meet again on 24 January.

With regard to citizens' rights, ministers will return to the differences in interpretation regarding the structural elements of the withdrawal agreement, which persist despite months of discussions, in particular as regards the link between the pre-settled status and settled status of beneficiaries of the withdrawal agreement in the United Kingdom.

Ministers will also address the challenges of implementing the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, in particular fishing and fair competition. As regards fishing, despite the progress achieved, a certain number of vessels eligible to fish in British territorial waters or in the waters around the Channel Islands are still awaiting authorisation. As regards fair competition, the situation is being monitored carefully by the General Affairs Council.

Lastly, ministers will also take stock of the negotiations between the European Union and the United Kingdom on Gibraltar.

[Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland: Commission proposes bespoke arrangements to benefit Northern Ireland \(European Commission press release, 13 October 2021\)](#)

[EU-UK relations: Commission delivers on promise to ensure continued supply of medicines to Northern Ireland, as well as Cyprus, Ireland and Malta \(European Commission press release, 17 December 2021\)](#)

[Joint Statement by Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič and UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss \(14 January 2022\)](#)
