

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

Brussels, 14 March 2022

The Council meeting will take place on Monday 14 March. The meeting will be chaired by Ms Elisabeth Borne, Minister for Labour, Employment and Economic Inclusion.

The Council will start at 9.00. During the morning session, the presidency will start by discussing the situation in Ukraine and the financial support measures decided on at European level for the reception of refugees.

The presidency also hopes to reach a general approach on a proposal for a directive on improving gender balance in the boardroom. Ministers will hold an exchange of views on combating discrimination in employment and promoting diversity in the world of work.

Over lunch, ministers will be able to exchange views on concrete actions to be implemented now to ensure social care, in particular in terms of accommodation, and access to food and essential goods and services, for displaced and refugee populations from Ukraine. This informal exchange will take place with the participation of a representative of the Red Cross.

The afternoon session, starting at 14.00, will include a policy debate on promoting the full participation of older people in the world of work. Ministers also plan to approve conclusions on a European Court of Auditors special report, adopt the joint employment report 2022 and approve conclusions on the 2022 annual sustainable growth strategy and joint employment report.

A press conference by Minister Elisabeth Borne with Commissioner Schmit is scheduled for 17.30.

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

Ukraine

Following Russia's unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine, thousands of people are fleeing from combat zones. These displaced persons, who are unable to return to their country of origin, must be given assistance for their reception and support, access to the labour market and housing, and social assistance, with particular attention to children and people with disabilities.

To finance this assistance, in a context where the health crisis has weakened public finances, the European Commission proposed on 8 March 2022 an initiative to renew the budgetary flexibilities and reallocations introduced into European social funds in 2020 (CARE regulation – 'Cohesion's action for refugees in Europe').

At the EPSCO Council meeting, the presidency therefore wishes to give the floor to the Commission so that it can present this initiative to ministers.

This point will be followed by an exchange between ministers over an informal lunch during which they will discuss the concrete actions they are taking at national level to respond to this situation.

Gender equality on company boards

Ministers will endeavour to reach a general approach on a proposal for a directive on improving gender balance in the boardroom. According to the [latest figures from the European Institute for Gender Equality \(EIGE\)](#), in October 2021 only 30.6% of board members and 8.5% of board chairs were women.

The directive establishes a quantitative objective for the proportion of directors of the under-represented sex on the boards of listed companies. Companies should therefore put in place measures to achieve the minimum objective of either 40% non-executive directors of the least represented sex or 33% for all board members by 2027. Companies that have not yet achieved this objective would be obliged to introduce procedural rules for the selection and appointment of non-executive directors and to explain what measures they had taken and intended to take to achieve that objective.

Member states that already have an effective system will be able to maintain it, provided it achieves the 40% or 33% objectives.

European Semester

In the context of the 2022 European Semester, the Council plans to adopt the joint employment report 2022 and approve conclusions on the 2022 annual sustainable growth strategy and joint employment report. In their conclusions, ministers call on member states to reflect the priorities of the annual sustainable growth survey and joint employment report and to step up their efforts to implement the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Published every autumn, the annual sustainable growth strategy outlines the economic and employment policy priorities for the EU for the coming 12 to 18 months. It is structured around four areas: environmental sustainability, productivity, fairness, and macroeconomic stability. The joint employment report monitors, on a yearly basis, the employment situation in the Union and the implementation of the employment guidelines. Both the survey and the report are prepared by the Employment and Social Protection Committees, which advise the Council on employment and social questions.

Combating discrimination in recruitment and promoting diversity in the world of work: tools and experiences (policy debate)

Equal treatment is a fundamental right in the EU which is put into practice in a number of EU laws. In addition to the existing rulebook which guarantees this principle, ongoing legislative measures – relating to pay transparency and gender balance on company boards, for example – specifically focus on improving gender equality on the labour market. Other initiatives the EU has adopted include an anti-racism action plan, the LGBTIQ equality strategy or the EU strategy for persons with disabilities.

Nevertheless, according to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, more than 50% of EU citizens think that there is still discrimination in their country. Persistent stereotypes, inadequate awareness among employers and workers of their obligations and rights, and insufficient implementation of anti-discrimination measures are some of the barriers to true equal treatment. At the same time, member states have undertaken various initiatives to advance equality in the workplace, including anonymous CVs, diversity labels, and recruiter training.

Ministers will exchange views on this subject and discuss what further EU action might be needed to combat discrimination in employment and what role and means national authorities should have to ensure proper implementation of EU rules.

Fostering full participation by older people in the labour market (policy debate)

The European Pillar of Social Rights action plan sets a target of at least 78% of people aged 20 to 64 in employment by 2030. However, according to Eurostat data, the level of employment for people aged between 55 and 64 is only 59.6%. The reasons for these low figures include difficult or inadequately adapted working conditions, negative attitudes towards the adaptability and productivity of older workers, and the fact that older people, more often than other age groups, perform work which is in decline due to transitions in the economy and on the labour market.

In its December 2021 conclusions, the Council underlined that a culture of lifelong learning and investment in health and safety at work were two key factors in keeping people in work.

The latter is also taken into account in the EU strategic framework on health and safety at work for 2021-2027, which highlights the need to adapt the working environment and working conditions in order to prevent professional drop-out.

Ministers will discuss action the EU could take to boost participation in the labour market and in training, as well as ways of adapting the work environment and working conditions to facilitate long careers for older people and thus keep them in employment.

European Court of Auditors special report

In December 2021, the European Court of Auditors published a special report on the measures taken by the European Social Fund (ESF) since 2014 to tackle long-term unemployment. The report concludes that the ESF measures were not always adapted to address the specific needs of long-term unemployed people. For the new ESF+ funding period, which runs from 2021 to 2027, the Court recommends that the European Commission should insist that member states use an individualised approach to help long-term unemployed people and should evaluate the effectiveness of 'access to employment' measures for such people.

The Council approved conclusions on this report, which calls on member states to offer in-depth individual assessments and guidance to jobseekers using all the resources available, including upskilling and reskilling schemes, to help remove social and psychological barriers.

Any other business

The presidency and the Commission will inform delegations about the upcoming tripartite social summit.

The European Commission will also brief ministers on:

- the implementation of the EU anti-racism action plan
- the annual report on gender equality
- its recent communication on the action plan to develop the social and solidarity economy
- national objectives for employment, skills and poverty reduction in the context of the European Pillar of Social Rights action plan
- the European child guarantee

The chairs of the Employment Committee and the Social Protection Committee will present their committees' work programmes for 2022.
