



EMPLOYMENT, SOCIAL POLICY, HEALTH AND CONSUMER AFFAIRS COUNCIL

Brussels, 08-09 December 2022

The first day of the EPSCO Council, dedicated to **employment and social policy**, will be chaired by Marian Jurečka, deputy prime minister and minister of labour and social affairs. The meeting will start at 9.30. Ministers will aim to reach a general approach on the directive on the protection of workers from the risks related to the exposure of asbestos at work and possibly on the directive on improving working conditions in platform work.

The lunch debate will cover the topic of family policy in the context of demographic developments.

The **health** session of the EPSCO Council on 9 December will be chaired by deputy prime minister and minister of health Vlastimil Válek and will start at 9.30. Ministers will have an exchange of views on COVID-19 vaccines procurement and aim to adopt a Council recommendation on cancer screening and Council conclusions on vaccination.

The ministerial lunch debate will be about mental health.

Press conferences:

- 8 December, +/- 18.00: Press conference with the minister of labour and social affairs Marian Jurečka and commissioner Nicolas Schmit
- 9 December, +/- 17.00: Press conference with the minister of health Vlastimil Válek and commissioner Stella Kyriakides

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Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council - meeting page

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.

EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL POLICY

Improving working conditions in platform work

Over 28 million people in the EU work through digital labour platforms, a number which is expected to increase significantly in the years to come. An estimated 5.5 million are incorrectly classified as self-employed. However, the right employment status for platform workers is crucial to ensure they enjoy the labour and social rights to which they are entitled. Workers who are wrongly classified as self-employed are not able to benefit from the same rights and protections as employed people.

The proposed new rules would also better protect the personal data of people performing platform work and increase the transparency of platforms vis-à-vis national authorities. At the upcoming EPSCO Council ministers plan to discuss a draft directive which would ensure that platform workers are granted the legal employment status they are entitled to. Possibly ministers might agree on a general approach. If not, a policy debate would be held in order to reach a general approach as soon as possible.

[EU rules on platform work](#) (background information)

Protecting workers from asbestos at work

As part of its Europe's Beating Cancer Plan in September of this year the Commission presented a proposal to revise a directive on the protection of workers from the risks related to exposure to asbestos at work. At the EPSCO Council meeting, ministers will aim to reach a joint position on the proposal.

The Commission proposal is to lower the occupational exposure level to asbestos to 0.01 fibres per cm³. This is a tenfold decrease compared to the value currently in force.

Equal treatment

In 2008, the Commission published a proposal for a Council directive to extend protection against discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation to areas outside employment. (The area of employment is covered by other EU legislation.) The proposed directive would prohibit discrimination on the abovementioned grounds in the following areas: social protection, including social security and healthcare; education; and access to goods and services, including housing. While a large majority of delegations have welcomed the proposal in principle, it has so far not been possible to reach the required unanimity.

The Czech presidency continued the discussion during its term and presented a new set of drafting suggestions. Delegations discussed, in particular, the requirement to provide reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities.

The presidency will present a progress report to the Council on 8 December.

[Equal treatment directive](#) (Progress report)

European Semester 2023

On 22 November 2022, the European Commission adopted the European Semester autumn package which launches the 2023 Semester cycle. The Semester is an instrument of economic, fiscal, employment and social policy coordination at both EU and member state level. The presentation – at the EPSCO Council – of this autumn package by the Commission will be followed by a policy debate of ministers of employment and social affairs. It will focus on employment, skills and social policy challenges and priority areas, the economic governance framework of the Semester and the role of the EPSCO in the monitoring of employment and social policies.

Another point under the Semester heading will be the review of the Council recommendation on the integration of long-term unemployed into the labour market. The recommendation was adopted in 2016 and its implementation has been reviewed for the fourth time.

European Care Strategy

On 7 September, the European Commission presented the European Care Strategy. The strategy was accompanied by two proposals for Council recommendations: on early childhood education and care and on affordable high-quality long-term care. Both recommendations will be on the agenda of the upcoming EPSCO Council with a view to their adoption.

The long-term care recommendation proposes actions to make care more accessible, affordable and of better quality. It looks both at people in need of long-term care as well as the providers of care.

Following on from the original “Barcelona targets” established by the European Council in 2002, the recommendation on early childhood education and care establishes *new* “Barcelona targets” for 2030 for two age groups: children under the age of three, and children aged between three and the compulsory school age.

A third agenda item related to the Care Strategy is an exchange of view of ministers. They will in particular address ways to improve the availability, quality, accessibility and affordability of care services in the current political and economic context. Another focus of the debate will be on how employment and skills policies at Union and member state level can ensure that work in the care sector is better valued, jobs are sufficiently attractive, gender inequalities are reduced and the quality of care services is improved.

[European Care Strategy](#) (European Commission)

[European Care Strategy](#) (policy debate)

Inclusion of persons with disabilities in the labour market

Persons with disabilities still face barriers when it comes to participating in society on an equal basis with others, and this is particularly evident in the labour market. The unemployment rate of persons with disabilities in the EU is 17.1% compared to 10.2% of persons without disabilities, and the activity rate of persons with disabilities is only 61.0% compared to 82.3% for persons without disabilities. When employed, persons with disabilities often work in sheltered employment rather than in the open labour market, or in lower qualified, lower paid (as evidenced by the 16% average annual wage gap) and less secure jobs with less access to training opportunities. This puts them at a higher risk of in-work poverty.

Against this backdrop, ministers plan to approve conclusions on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the labour market. The Conclusions build on the “Disability Employment Package”, a set of initiatives launched in September by the Commission at a Czech presidency conference. They call on member states to support persons with disabilities on the path to the open labour market and to develop incentives for employers to hire them. Member states are also called to support vocational education and training for person with disabilities, as well as to facilitate their transition from rehabilitation or social enterprises into the labour market.

Gender equality in disrupted economies

In a policy brief from October 2022 the European Institute for Gender Equality notes that young women and men – who often work in temporary and part-time positions – have been particularly vulnerable to the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. While young men are steadily re-entering the labour market, young women are experiencing long-term unemployment. The pandemic has also increased the threat of social, material and housing deprivation for young women.

Other pressing challenges causing disruption include the economic consequences of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the energy crisis and rising prices. Against this background, ministers are planning to approve Council conclusions on *gender equality in disrupted economies, with a particular focus on the young generation* which focus on ways to ensure equality and fairness as EU member states seek to address today's crises and challenges, including in the context of the green and digital transitions.

[Young women and men in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic](#) (European Institute of Gender Equality)

Minimum income

According to the targets of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion should be reduced by at least 15 million by 2030, including at least 5 million children. Minimum income schemes are an important tool to lift people out of poverty.

At the EPSCO Council member states plan to reach a political agreement on a Council recommendation on adequate minimum income. The recommendation proposes strengthening social safety nets to guarantee a life in dignity. It deals with the adequacy of income support, the coverage of minimum income and the facilitation of its take-up (e.g. by simplifying administrative procedures).

Other business

The presidency will inform delegations on the state of play on the decision on the European Year of Skills 2023 as well as on the conferences held during its term.

The Commission will provide information on the upcoming directives on strengthening the role and independence of equality bodies and on the state of play on the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness.

The upcoming Swedish presidency finally will present its work programme.

HEALTH

European Health Data Space

On 3 May 2022, the Commission adopted a proposal for a Regulation on the European Health Data Space. Since then member states representatives discussed the proposal at 17 Council working parties. On the basis of the ongoing discussions, the presidency presented a compromise text of those chapters of the proposal dealing with primary use of electronic health data and European health record systems. At the upcoming EPSCO Council the presidency will present a state of play of the deliberations of this file.

The proposal aims to make it easier for patients to have access to their health data in electronic form and to share this data with health professionals within the EU. It will also allow to use electronic health data for better research, innovation and policy making.

[European Health Data Space](#) (European Commission)

Substances of human origin

In July 2022, the European Commission adopted the proposal for a regulation on standards of quality and safety for substances of human origin (such as blood, tissues and cells). One element of the proposal is about facilitating cross-border circulation of these critical substances. It also aims at boosting the protection for (organ, blood and cell) donors and recipients as well as the offspring born from medically assisted reproduction together with facilitating innovations in this area. The new regulation, once adopted would repeal the blood directive (from 2002) and the tissues and cells directive (from 2004).

Since the launch of the proposal, member state delegates examined the draft law at four occasions. The presidency will present a note on the progress made during their term.

[Substances of human origin](#) (European Commission)

Vaccination

Ministers will address the topic of vaccination at two occasions during the Council meeting. They will firstly exchange views on COVID-19 vaccine procurement. In order to ensure all member states would have swift access to vaccines, the Commission negotiated directly with vaccine producers on behalf of all member states. However, in the current stage of the pandemic, several member states are dealing with an oversupply of vaccines, raising multiple budgetary and logistical questions. Ministers will discuss future steps in view of a possible adaptation of the contracts.

Also on the agenda are conclusions on vaccination as one of the most effective tools for preventing disease and improving public health. The conclusions describe the success of vaccination (as many cases of illness have been prevented or even eradicated thanks to vaccination) but highlight also that vaccination has become to a certain extent a victim of its own success and that some people may even question its benefits. Vaccination coverage rates are falling below recommended levels and infectious diseases may easily return under such circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted these both sides of the same medal: on the one hand vaccination hesitancy – among other things fuelled by mis- and disinformation – and differences in vaccination rates among member states and on the other hand successful vaccination development, digitalisation and European-level cooperation. In the light of this member states conclude the need to learn from the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure adequate preparedness for future public health crises.

The conclusions ministers plan to approve focus on two areas to prevent and limit the spread of epidemics and vaccine-preventable diseases: combating vaccine hesitancy and preparing for upcoming challenges through EU cooperation.

[COVID-19 vaccine procurement](#) (exchange of views)

A new EU approach to cancer screening

Cancer is a major disease and cause of death throughout Europe. In 2020, an estimated 2.7 million people in the Union were diagnosed with cancer. A Council recommendation from 2003 encourages member states to implement population-based, quality-assured screening programmes. It recommends screening tests for cervical, breast and colorectal cancer.

Health ministers are planning to adopt a new recommendation which contains updated methodologies and tests for breast, cervical and colorectal cancer screening and introduces organised cancer screening programmes for lung, prostate and, in certain circumstances, gastric cancer.

Screening makes it possible to detect cancers at an early stage, or possibly even before they become invasive. Thanks to early testing, some lesions can then be treated more effectively, with a greater chance that patients can be cured.

Other business

The presidency and the Commission will inform ministers on the negotiations for an international agreement on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response as well as complementary amendments to the International Health Regulations.

The Commission will provide information on the revision of the pharmaceutical legislation, on the EU Global Health Strategy, on the State of Health Preparedness Report and on the implementation of the medical device regulation. The German delegation will present an information point on the Clinical Trials Information System.

The Czech presidency will give information on conferences organised during its term. The upcoming Swedish presidency finally will present its work programme.