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We have to be honest

When we first floated the idea to publish a magazine on the committees of the European Parliament, enthusiasm was low.

It couldn't be that interesting, could it?

But the ones who thought this would be a dull exercise, were very wrong.

When we asked the committee chairs what the challenges were for the next five years, the responses appeared to be fascinating.

Not only can we confirm that almost every committee chair actually knows well what he or she is talking about.

When you put all the responses together, you get a complete overview of what the European Union will work on in the years to come.

When you go through the overview, you will also see that the challenges for the EU are probably bigger than ever.

We are reaching critical years in the fight against climate change, in the rise of artificial intelligence and digitalisation.

Topics like ageing and migration have not received a proper answer yet, while at the same time a new financial and economic crisis might be around the corner.

Brexit will give headaches in many fields, but perhaps most in the EU budget for 2021-2027, as other countries will have to fill the gap that the UK leaves behind.

A major question remains how Europe can continue to play the role of good example in its foreign policy and trade, while at the same time governments of member states are breaking the rules.

Another challenge that needs a response is the remaining gap between western and central (eastern) Europe.

Not only politically, but also socially and economically, as waves of change might affect newer member states more than expected.

A last point that has become clear during the last months: the European Parliament is becoming less and less a follower, and more and more of an actor.

The signal that was given during the hearings - and refusals - of candidates for the European Commission was just a first warning.

The European Parliament will play a stronger role in European decision-making than ever before.

And that's great news for Europe's democracy.

— Koert Debeuf
Welcome to the EU engine room

The European Parliament (EP’s) 22 committees, which churn out hundreds of new laws and non-binding reports each year and which keep an eye on other European institutions.

By Andrew Rettman

EP committees made the headlines in autumn when they rejected French, Hungarian, and Romanian nominees to join the European Commission.

The candidates’ hearings were prepared by each committee’s "secretariat", a group of EP officials.

The committee chairs led public debates with the nominees in which MEPs from every EP group fielded questions.

The groups’ "committee coordinators", or spokespersons, then met in secret to negotiate how their MEPs would vote and the decisions ensued.

The EU nomination cycle happens once every five years, after EP elections.

But it gives an insight into how the EP’s 20 permanent committees and two sub-committees conduct their business.

Their day-to-day work consists of binding "co-decision" on EU laws, in areas such as the single market, economic governance, immigration, trade, industry, and climate change.

They help agree how much the EU will spend in its multi-annual budgets and how to divide up subsidies to farmers and poor regions.

The committees’ daily work also involves non-binding "consultation" on EU decisions in other areas, such as foreign policy, taxation, and competition law.

And the EP engine room produced texts that underpinned 2,625 plenary votes on legislative and non-legislative reports in the past five years.

Each committee contains between 21 (fisheries, the smallest) and 71 (foreign affairs, the largest) members.

The chairs and deputy chairs as well as other members get their seats for a two-and-a-half year period via the "D’Hondt method".

The algorithm, named after a 19th century Belgian mathematician, has often been the butt of jokes on the Byzantine obscurity of EU rules, but it makes sure every political group gets a fair share in relation to how well they did in the EP election.

The committees normally work by electing "rapporteurs", MEPs who draft legal and non-legal texts.

The rapporteurs are chosen via another complicated points system, in which EP political groups bid for a report on a given topic, as in an auction.

The committees debate amendments to those texts in public hearings, invite experts, and send fact-finding missions if need be.

The coordinators also play an important role in rapporteur appointments. They appoint shadow rapporteurs, prepare committee decisions, and whip their own group members into toeing the line.
The committees then vote on final drafts, which they pass on to plenary sessions for the EP's formal seal of approval.

But the 2,625 number of EP decisions in the past five years tells only part of the story.

The committees normally grind legislation proposed by the European Commission, which also has to be agreed with member states.

They do it ahead of first and second "readings" of the laws in the EP, which take between one and two years to complete, but if initial talks do not end in agreement, they appoint special teams, called "conciliation committees", to finalise negotiations with EU countries' diplomats.

They also get involved in other nitty gritty in Europe's law-making machine, by taking part in "trilogues" and by helping to forge "delegated" and "implementing" acts.

Trilogues see rapporteurs sit down with EU commission officials and EU diplomats in secret meetings to hammer out informal compromises. And there were 251 of them convened in 2017, in what was part of a growing trend in the way the EU capital works.

Delegated acts supplement or amend existing legislation, while bypassing normal procedure for making whole new laws.

Implementing acts give details on how to put the law into practice in micro-decisions which can have serious financial implications for industry. The committees normally wait for the commission to send legal proposals.

But they can also put out "own initiative" reports, indicating the EP's views on a given subject, and call for the EU commission to draft new laws on matters of concern, even though the commission is free to ignore such an appeal.

Some of them have special tasks, such as the subcommittee on security and defence, which monitors the EU's 16 overseas civilian and military missions, ranging from a police force in Kosovo, to coast-guard training in Libya, and an anti-piracy force in the Indian Ocean.

Others, such as the foreign affairs committee, debate grand ideas on Russia and China geopolitics, while others still, such as the petitions committee, handle smaller issues, such as the distance between desks in Polish schools or the right to fly with pets.

But even those which exerted soft power only still helped shape what comes out of Brussels into wider Europe, with the petitions committee chairman, Spanish MEP Dolors Montserrat (EPP), saying that its recommendations or its memos to EU embassies "sometimes" amounted to "considerable influence" even if they had no legal force.
MEPs on the foreign affairs committee (AFET) ought to be like second-tier EU diplomats on the Western Balkans and Russia in the next five years, according to its German chairman, David McAllister.

They should also help forge an EU "Weltpolitikfähigkeit" (world-politics capability) vis-à-vis the US and China, he said. But AFET contains the same divisions that have held back member states from acting together, its Polish deputy chairman indicated.

The European Parliament has no decision-making powers on EU foreign policy, which member states do by unanimity.

But AFET MEPs have in the past "played a prominent role in parliamentary diplomacy, including in mediation and conflict prevention" and the EP's "diplomacy role should be strengthened" in the new legislature, McAllister said.

MEPs should support Western Balkans enlargement, promote democracy in former Soviet countries, push for implementation of a Russia-Ukraine ceasefire deal, and help develop EU strategy on the Middle East and Africa and on counter-terrorism and migration, he said.

AFET deputies should also "promote multilateralism and a global rules-based order", the German added. EU-US relations had faced "challenges and disruptions", but must be fixed, and EU-China ambitions must not forget "human rights", he noted.

If AFET helped the EU emerge as "a global leader", that would be its biggest achievement, McAllister said. But issues such as reforming EU foreign policy unanimity, getting along with US president Donald Trump, and Russia could be "controversial", the German politician warned.

And member states' divisions were replicated inside AFET, its deputy chair, former Polish foreign minister Witold Waszczykowski, indicated.

Speaking out on Russia's "open conflict" against Ukraine and on the need for Russia sanctions should be the committee's top priority, Waszczykowski said, in a narrower threat assessment.

AFET coordinators are: Michael Gahler (EPP, Germany), Tonino Picula, (S&D, Croatia), Hilde Vautmans (Renew, Belgium), Reinhard Bütikofer (Greens/EFA, Germany), Thierry Mariani (ID, France), Anna Fotyga (ECR, Poland) and Idola Villanueva Ruiz (GUE/NGL, Spain) and Manu Pineda (GUE/NGL, Spain).
Belgian socialist MEP Marie Arena is chairing the European Parliament's sub-committee on human rights. Her biggest challenge? Finding ways to reach objectives that cover an enormous spectrum of issues — from climate to child protection. By Nikolaj Nielsen

The European Union has yet to ratify the European Convention on Human Rights - despite a treaty obligation to do so under Lisbon.

In his farewell speech in September, Thorbjorn Jagland, the now former secretary general of the Council of Europe, said it is still not possible to hold the European Union to account, should it violate the convention.

With that in mind, ongoing efforts are being made at the European Parliament to scrutinise how the EU implements human rights policy. Among them is the sub-committee on human rights, chaired by centre-left Belgian MEP Marie Arena (S&D).

Despite having four vice-chairs hailing from different political groups, Arena says the internal dynamics are so far smooth. All have agreed to cluster their priorities around six big themes for the next two-and-a-half years.

"I think the most difficult part will be finding the ways to reach our objectives, and not the objectives themselves - which puts us up to a very good start in my opinion," she told EUobserver.

Behind the scenes, the committee's coordinators will be working to align the effort.

The centre-right has Isabel Wiseler-Lima (EPP, Luxembourg) as its coordinator, the socialists Isabel Santos (S&D, Portugal), the liberals' Irina von Wiese (Renew Europe, UK), the greens Germany's Hannah Neumann (Green/EFA, Germany), the conservatives Karol Karski (ECR, Poland), and the far-left Miguel Urbán Crespo (GUE/NGL, Spain).

The areas are vast. At the top of the list is the environment and climate change, core issues that have galvanised a global movement led by the Swedish 16-year old, Greta Thunberg.

The committee will also focus in on business and human rights, minorities and freedom of religion, civil society, migration, and new technologies.

Other big topics like children's rights, women's rights, indigenous peoples' rights plus legal impunity will be addressed as cross-cutting issues.

The sub-committee's objective for the upcoming years is to ensure that the EU's action on the international scene is guided by the same principles that inspired its creation, according to Arena, as she lists democracy, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms as examples.

"My wish is to be able to do so without aggravating the situation in countries that are facing threats to their fundamental rights," she said.

Turkey's crackdown on opposition and journalists, the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar, activists pressing for women's rights in Iran, are all difficult cases.

But the wider backlash against civil society and human rights also poses challenges within the EU itself - as Hungary puts the squeeze on migration, and Poland undermines the rule of law.

"If we are able to promote fundamental values and see concrete signs of improvement, even if just on one case or one region, that would be the greatest achievement in my opinion," Arena said, when asked for her hopes for over the coming five years.
Gearing up for EU spending on arms procurement will be a top priority for the committee on security and defence, according to its French chairwoman - but ethical questions remain.

By Andrew Rettman

Gearing up for the first big wave of EU spending on arms procurement will be a top priority for the European Parliament's subcommittee on security and defence (SEDE), according to its chairman, French liberal politician Nathalie Loiseau. But regulatory and strategic questions remained "unanswered", she said.

The committee would "monitor implementation of the tools we've created to enhance our defence union", Loiseau said, naming an alphabet soup of acronyms for EU projects on new defence assets: Pesco, EDF, and EDIDP.

Permanent Structured Cooperation (Pesco), is to see 29 clubs of assorted EU states develop new attack helicopters, missile systems, and artillery guidance systems, among other hardware.

The list also includes drones, autonomous weapons systems, electronic warfare, and military space surveillance, "addressing new challenges," Loiseau said.

SEDE's task was to "adopt EDF regulation in full", she added, referring to the European Defence Fund, a €13bn pot for developing new systems.

And the committee should guide European Commission spending on the European defence industrial development programme (EDIDP), she said, referring to a separate €590m pot for defence research.

Some of SEDE's time would be spent monitoring the EU's 16 overseas civilian and military missions, Loiseau noted.

These ranged from a police force in Kosovo, to coast-guard training in Libya, and an anti-piracy force in the Indian Ocean.

Her committee saw eye-to-eye on its agenda, Loiseau indicated, but that did not mean there was no debate. "It's more about unanswered questions than divisive topics, for instance: what is the role of the EU on arms exports?", she said.

SEDE's main task should be "improvement of European defence mechanisms", she noted.

But "I would very much like to see a European defence strategy adopted," she added, with big questions such as: "does the functioning of Nato answer all our priorities in terms of defence of Europe? How do we build a satisfactory defence partnership with the UK after Brexit?", still "unanswered" as well.

Loiseau, a former French EU affairs minister and a former director of an elite French academy, is likely to work hand-in-glove with France's EU commissioner, in charge of the single market, industry, and defence portfolio.

French president Emmanuel Macron is a leading proponent of EU defence integration.

And while different views exist on Nato versus EU military structures, SEDE also contains a galaxy of former stars from Russia-facing EU states for whom joint arms procurement is welcomed.

Romania's former president Traian Băsescu (EPP, Romania) is a member, along with three former Polish foreign ministers: Anna Fotyga (ECR, Poland), Radosław Sikorski (EPP, Poland), and Witold Waszczykowski (ECR, Poland), plus an Estonian one, Urmas Paet (Renew, Estonnia).

The committee's European Parliament group coordinators are: Arnaud Danjean (EPP, France); Sven Mikser (S&D, Estonia); Petras Austreivicius (Renew, Lithuania); Hannah Neumann (Greens/EFA, Germany); Jérôme Rivière (ID, France); Geoffrey Van Orden (ECR, UK); and Mick Wallace (GUE/NGL, Germany).
Development to fuel change

The European Parliament’s development committee says its overarching priority will be to deliver on the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. Achieving that will require an action plan and targeted investments, says its chair Swedish centre-right MEP Tomas Tobé.

By Andrew Rettman

Last year, the European Commission earmarked almost €90bn for a so-called Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (or NDICI for short).

EU jargon and acronyms aside, the NDICI has serious ramifications for a whole set of policies when it comes to development across the globe.

For Swedish centre-right MEP Tomas Tobé, who chairs the European Parliament’s development committee, the issue ranks among a number of top priorities that will need to be tackled over the five years.

"An overarching priority will be to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals. In order to do that, we need a concrete action plan and we need well-targeted investments," he says.

The development committee describes itself as a champion of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development and the global goals agreed by all UN members in 2015.

Those goals aim to reduce poverty, inequality, environmental degradation while at the same time tackling climate change and ensuring prosperity, peace, and justice.

Divided up into 17 categories, they are designed to act as a blueprint for the future of the developing world.

But the UN’s target date is only 10 years away - a tall order for a world whose political leadership has been dragging its feet on a rapidly-changing climate and biodiversity loss.

Other immediate challenges also remain. Next February, the EU's existing pact with Africa, known as the Cotonou Partnership Agreement, comes to an end.

Adopted in 2000, it covers EU relations between the EU and African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. Some 48 states are from sub-Saharan Africa alone. The pact spans development, trade and politics.

Talks officially kicked off in September last year with migration becoming an increasingly big sticking point.

In a sign that shows how development is merging into other policy areas, foreign and defence ministers across the EU met over the summer in Brussels to discuss improving security in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.

Two days later, development ministers joined in, demonstrating the cross-cutting nature of policy in a region where conflict has affected millions.

Asked what he hopes will be the single most important achievement for his committee over the next five years, Tobé mentions visibility.

"Policy achievements aside, I want European development policy to be more visible and the results highlighted and communicated in a much better way than in the past," he says.

Specifically, it means recognising development policy as an instrument to fuel change in a variety of fields including economic growth, innovation, environmental protection, multilateralism, democracy.

Getting consensus within the committee on such issues won’t be easy and risks becoming the most divisive point they will have to deal with.

"It's essential that we challenge our perspectives by means of political debate, and that we constantly put our policies to the test," he says.

Those policies will likely be tested by the committee’s coordinators, which include György Hölvényi (EPP, Hungary), Udo Bullmann (S&D, Germany), Charles Goerens (Renew, Luxembourg), Michèle Rivasi (Greens/EFA, France), Bernhardt Zimniok (ID, Germany), Beata Kempa (ECR, Poland) and Miguel Urbán Crespo (GUE/NGL, Spain).
Making EU trade deals work for citizens

The Mercosur trade deal and the US trade policy will be debated in the European Parliament’s trade committee, where chairman Bernd Lange wants to make genuine progress on enforcing sustainable development measures through the EU’s trade agreements. By Eszter Zalan

As global trade disputes increase, protectionism is on the rise, and climate protection becomes a mainstream political objective, trade is becoming an increasingly political topic.

The trade committee of the European Parliament (INTA) will thus host some heated debates.

Sustainability, and the implementation and enforcement of the EU’s trade agreements will be the two basic principles guiding the priorities for the trade committee, German MEP Bernd Lange told EUobserver, when asked about the focus in the next five years.

"When I speak to Europeans in my constituency and elsewhere, I feel that there is a certain amount of expectation in terms of how trade policy can contribute to wider sustainability goals, such as the fight against climate change," the German social democrat said.

European citizens also ask themselves, 'who benefits from the trade deals?', Lange added - referring to the growing number of trade deals the EU has secured and is planning to close.

"They look very good on paper. They also need to deliver clear benefits for European citizens, workers, consumers and businesses alike," the MEP said.

Lange expects some battles over the ratification of the Mercosur trade agreement with Argentina, Brazil Paraguay and Uruguay reached over the summer.

"If INTA will be asked to give its consent to the trade agreement with Mercosur, I believe there will be a strong division in my committee between those who are really critical about this agreement, because of its impact on Europe’s agricultural sector and in light of recent political developments in Brazil, and those who are in favour," he said.

These divisions, however, are "nothing new", added Lange, who chaired the committee in the previous parliamentary terms as well.

Lange also expects "very different" views on how to deal with the US administration's trade policy, which has increasingly used tariffs on goods from Europe but at the same wants to reach a trade deal with the EU.

Talks have been on hold, because the US insists agriculture products must be a part of the deal, which the EU does not agree to.

The planned carbon-adjustment measure, an idea to compel other countries to meet he EU’s climate standards or face taxes added to their products at the EU's borders, will also undoubtedly face very conflicting interests and views, Lange predicts.

"If at the end of this legislature we can say that we made genuine progress in terms of enforcing these non-trade commitments through our agreements, I think we can be satisfied," he said.

The coordinators of the INTA committee are: Christophe Hansen (EPP, Luxembourg), Kathleen Van Brempt (S&D, Belgium), Haidi Hautala (Greens/EFA, Finland), Karin Karlsbro (Renew, Sweden), Markus Buchheit (ID, Germany), Geert Bourgeois (ECR, Belgium) and Helmut Scholz (GUE/NGL, Germany).
The European Commission proposed to increase the EU budget from 1.03 to 1.11 percent. As Brexit will mean that net-contributing countries will have to pay more, a big debate is on its way.

By Koert Debeuf

In May 2019, the European Commission proposed to increase the EU budget from 1.03 percent to 1.11 percent of all European economies combined.

This figure will be the basis of the debate on the so-called Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF), which is Brussels-bubble speak for the EU budget for the next seven years.

The last MFF started in 2014 and ends in 2020. The next one will start in 2021 and end in 2027.

The increase was then seen as high, but less so than expected.

Compared to this other federation, the United States, one percent is still a very low number, as the federal government in Washington has a budget of around 20 percent of the GDP of the country.

Until the First World War however, the US federal budget was not much higher than one percent too, with the postal service as the largest federal budgetary post.

In other words, the EU budget is still rather small. But this doesn't mean that the discussions on the next MFF will not be substantial.

Johan Van Overtveldt (ECR, Belgium), the chairman of the committee that coordinates the discussions on the MFF, or BUDG, obviously sees "reaching an agreement on the next MFF" as the committee's priority number one.

A second challenge, according to him, will be "the absorption of what comes out of the Brexit saga". Brexit has two major consequences on the budget.

First of all, the UK's contribution to the EU disappears from the budget. This will need to be compensated, mainly by net-contributors (countries that pay more than they receive.)

A second consequence is that the European Commission wants to abolish all rebates when the UK, the mother of all rebates, leaves the Union.

Germany calculated that its contribution will double, while the contribution of the Netherlands would go up by 75 percent.

That is the reason why five net contributors – Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark and Sweden – have asked not to increase the EU's budget and stick to the one percent.

A third challenge, Van Overtveldt said, will be "the question of the own resources of the EU and whether or not there will be more EU fiscal revenues or not."

The fact that the European economy – and certainly the German economy – is doing less well than predicted, will make the discussions on increasing the EU budget even tougher.

So, for Van Overtveldt, it is clear that he will be happy if his committee succeeds "in reaching an MFF in which the member states can find themselves, one that will strengthen the credibility of the EU and the social-economic fabric."

The coordinators are: José Manuel Fernandes (EPP, Portugal), Eider Gardiazabal (S&D, Spain), Valérie Hayer (Renew, France), Rasmus Andresen (Greens/EFA, Germany), Joachim Kuhs (ID, Germany), Bogdan Rzonca (ECR, Poland), Younous Omarjee (GUE/GNL, France).
Fighting corruption and cutting red tape  
By Eszter Zalan

Fighting corruption, enforcement of the rule of law, simplifying rules and procedures on the EU budget, and an effective public prosecutor's office - this is what the chair of the budget control committee expects from the next five years.

As EU countries debate the next long-term budget for the bloc, and how to link the respect for the rule of law and the fight against corruption to EU funds, the budget control committee (CONT) will continue to play a central part in defending the EU budget.

MEP Monika Hohlmeier (EPP, Germany), chair of the committee knows this can be a touchy subject for member states.

"I believe that one of the most sensitive, yet extremely important topics on our agenda in the committee will be the continued fight against corruption. In a small number of cases, national governments may be involved, which could make the debate highly political," Hohlmeier told EUobserver.

"Therefore, it is crucial to improve the strict enforcement of the rule of law in all member states," she added.

"Unfortunately, the existing rule of law mechanism in the Lisbon Treaty is not working properly. Thus, there is still a lot to be done to get ahead with creating an effective and transparent rule of law legislation," the politician from the Bavarian Christian Social Union party said.

"CONT must ensure that the rule of law mechanism becomes effective and is applied equally in all member states - without exception! I believe that we in CONT should focus on the big issues and point our finger to issues of systemic failures in a constructive approach to increase our impact," Hohlmeier added.

Hohlmeier expects that the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO), which will start operating in 2020, makes "a strong contribution in combating cross-border VAT-fraud, money laundering and crimes against the EU's financial interests".

"For EPPO to become a success it is of utmost importance to ensure that it is adequately equipped for having a serious impact. Achieving this is an important goal for CONT," the MEP said.

Hohlmeier said she is delighted that the parliament’s candidate for the top prosecutor position, Laura Kovesi, was confirmed recently.

"EU money is taxpayers’ money, and the budget control committee ensures that it is spent correctly, efficiently and in a purposeful way," she said.

One of the key points on the agenda for the committee for the next five years will be the simplification of rules and procedures and the reduction of ‘gold-plating’, the addition of national rules and requirements to an already quite complex EU legislation, Hohlmeier said.

"One of the issues that the European Court of Auditors repeatedly finds to cause errors in relation to the use of EU financial means is the complexity of rules and procedures, particularly in the areas of agriculture, cohesion, and research and innovation," she said.

The coordinators: Tomas Zdechovsky (EPP, Czech Republic), Claudiu Manda (S&D, Romania), Olivier Chastel (Renew, Belgium), Mikulas Peksa (Greens/EFA, Czech Republic), Joachim Kuhs (ID, Germany), Ryszard Czarnecki (ECR, Poland), Luke Ming Flanagan (GUE/NGL, Ireland).
The European Union will need more integration and economic and fiscal instruments to survive the next economic and financial crisis. By Koert Debeuf

The European Parliament's committee for economic and monetary affairs (ECON) has been at the heart of the biggest crisis the European Union has seen since its foundation.

The financial and economic crisis of 2008/2009 has shaken the EU to its foundations. Not only were banks collapsing and people lost their savings, the euro was under severe pressure too.

For the first time since its introduction, in 2002 in 12 EU countries, people started to believe that the debt crisis could make the eurozone break up, with Greece as the first country to give up the single currency.

When Greece was saved, investors started to speculate on the budgetary collapse of Italy and Spain, two of the largest European countries.

Mario Draghi, president of the European Central Bank (ECB) stepped in and gave the only message that would stop the speculation: "Within our mandate, the ECB is ready to do whatever it takes to preserve the euro. And believe me, it will be enough."

However, the ECB was not the only institution that took action.

The European Commission, together with ECON, worked on new instruments to control and regulate banks and financial products.

And that is no doubt what they will do in the five years to come.

Unfortunately, the chairman of the ECON committee didn’t answer EUobserver’s questions, but luckily, Mario Draghi gave a farewell speech in which he talked about the challenges in economic and monetary affairs.

Draghi argued that after years of crises or weak growth, the ECB has exhausted its conventional policy arsenal to stimulate growth and that new institutional instruments are needed.

"It is plain to see that now is the time for more Europe, not less," Draghi said, adding that a common budget for the EU was necessary so there would be a centralised capacity to stabilise the monetary union.

"Today, we are in a situation where low interest rates are not delivering the same degree of stimulus as in the past, because the rate of return on investment in the economy has fallen," Draghi continued.

"Monetary policy can still achieve its objective, but it can do so faster and with fewer side effects if fiscal policies are aligned with it," he added.

Just as armies are perfectly trained to win the last war, instead of the next, the EU’s instruments are not ready to deal with the next financial and economic crisis.

Therefore it will be an enormous challenge for the ECON committee to think ahead, together with the European Commission and the national governments to make sure the EU economy and the euro will survive a future crisis.

The chairwoman is Irene Tinagli (S&D, Italy). The coordinators are: Markus Ferber (EPP, Germany), Jonas Fernandez (S&D, Spain), Luis Garicano (Renew, Spain), Sven Giegold (Greens/EFA, Germany), Gunnar Beck (ID, Germany), Derk-Jan Eppink (ECR, the Netherlands), José Gusmao (GUE/NGL, Portugal).
The labour market is not ready for the future

The European labour market will face enormous challenges with its combination of an ageing population, climate change and a digital transformation and will increase the east-west divide in Europe. By Koert Debeuf

The chairman of the committee for employment and social affairs (EMPL), Lucia Duris Nicholsonova (ECR, Slovakia), writes in her welcome to the committee website that EMPL is "responsible for employment and all aspects of social policy including working conditions, social security, social inclusion and social protection; the free movement of workers and pensioners; workers' rights; health and safety measures at the workplace; the European Social Fund; vocational training policy, including professional qualifications; social dialogue; and all forms of discrimination at the workplace and in the labour market except those based on sex."

However, her most important worry is that "we are not ready for the challenge of ageing population, climate and digital transformation."

Duris Nicholsonova quotes figures from the European Commission saying that "around 17 percent of jobs in the EU are at risk of being automated and nearly one-in-three jobs will change significantly. The jobs threat from automation is varying from less than 10 percent in Finland to a shocking 33 percent in Slovakia.

"Moreover," she continues, "in spite of a downward trend in the last years, still a shocking 22.4 percent of the Union population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the Union in 2017, and 24.9 percent of children are concerned by poverty and social exclusion (from 14.2 percent in Czech Republic to 41.7 percent in Romania)."

These figures summarise the challenges of the EMPL committee.

With the commission, the committee will discuss the European Pillar of Social Rights and a number of initiatives within it, such as Child Guarantee and full implementation of the Work-Life Balance Directive.

On top of that, Duris Nicholsonova promises to "keep on fighting poverty more efficiently and guarantee children access to basic services such as childcare," and to work on the pay and pension gap of female workers.

Despite the fact that all these dossiers seem to be consensual challenges, several political parties see different solutions.

But probably more important will be the divide between 'eastern' and 'western' member states.

According to Duris Nicholsonova "the differing level of employment social standards and rules on the cross-border provision of services, where they have a significant effect as competitive factors" have proved to be divisive between those states.

Here she hopes that as chair of the EMPL committee and as an "elected member of a 'new member state" to play a role in bridging that gap.

The committee will also try to "have more efficient EU funding and avoid misusing of the funds on clearly inefficient or fraudulent projects".

An interesting new point on the agenda might come from the commission, as the committee called on it "to examine the possibility for a proposal for a European Social Security Number without undue delay."

It is clear that the EMPL committee will be one to watch in the years to come.

Coordinators: Dennis Radtke (EPP, Germany), Agnes Jongerius (S&D, Netherlands), Dragos Pislaru (Renew, Romania), Kira Marie Peter-Hansen (Greens/EFA, Denmark), France Jamet (ID, France), Elzbieta Rafalska (ECR, Poland), Nikolaj Villumsen (GUE/NGL, Denmark).
ENVI to deliver 'Green Deal' as main priority

The French liberal MEP Pascal Canfin, who is chairing the European Parliament's committee on environment, public health, and food safety, is adamant to deliver the Green Deal quickly - because "we cannot afford to waste time". By Elena Sánchez Nicolás

Climate, environment, and health are some of the top priorities for European citizens. The high turnout in the 2019 EU elections (50.6 percent), mainly driven by the participation by young people, sent a clear message to European politicians.

Economy and growth, as well as climate change, were the main reasons to participate in the elections, according to a Eurobarometer survey carried out by the EU parliament last June.

The committee on environment, public health and food safety (ENVI), chaired by MEP Pascal Canfin (Renew, France) sees in the new Green Deal promised by the EU Commission president-elect Ursula von der Leyen a "unique opportunity" to answer the call citizens made in the votes.

The committee will focus its efforts on four main dimensions of the environmental crisis that impact our daily lives: climate emergency, biodiversity loss, environmental health, and resources crisis.

For the Green Deal to work, Europe needs to elaborate a comprehensive approach, including a renewed climate law to achieve carbon neutrality, and finding funding for the energy transition, Canfin told EUobserver.

"We will have to mobilise and generate financing capacities to bridge the investment gap of €200bn of private and public investments, each year until 2030, in order to meet the commitments of the Paris Agreement," he said.

The implementation of the Green Deal must be just and fair from west to east and south to north. "We should leave no one behind," Canfin added.

One of the most challenging objectives of this taskforce will be finding and deploying industrial and agricultural solutions in line with the carbon-neutral target for 2050 that Europe has committed to achieving.

The committee sees that now is the moment to boost sustainable measures such as producing cheap and large-scale renewable energies, developing affordable electric cars or building high-efficiency infrastructure, deploying carbon-neutral technologies in all relevant sectors.

The ENVI (Environment, Public Health and Food Safety) committee has a long-standing reputation of a forward-looking and progressive policy-making, said Canfin, who considers that the main priority for the next five years should be to deliver the Green Deal - setting up a clear roadmap.

"We cannot afford to waste time. We need a fast yet robust implementation of the Green Deal across Europe," he said.

To do so, the committee in charge of environmental policies will have to convince the rest of MEPs to reach a consistent European approach in terms of climate action.

However, making Europe the first carbon-neutral continent by 2050, while supporting a heterogenous energy transition and a circular economy based on zero pollution, will not be an easy task for any of the parties involved - parliament, commission, and member states.

"I will work with all the stakeholders that want to ensure that president-elect von der Leyen's ambition becomes a reality," he assured, adding that this generation is the first one who has all the levers to drive change, but also the last one to avoid a climate disaster.

The coordinators are Peter Liese (EPP, Germany), Jytte Guteland (S&D, Sweden), Nils Torvalds (Renew, Finland), Bas Eickhout (Greens/EFA, Netherlands), Silvia Saradone (ID, Italy), Alexandr Vondra (ECR, Czech Republic) and Silvia Modig (GUE/NGL, Finland).
Time for an EU Commissioner for Animal Welfare

Including the competence for animal welfare explicitly in the job title of the relevant commissioner not only would respond to the demands of the vast majority of EU citizens, but would also help to show them that something so close to their heart is taken seriously by the European institutions, and more will be done to grant animals the better treatment they deserve.

Read more on www.wewantyou.eu
EU must manage climate and industry together

For Romanian centre-right MEP Adina-Ioana Valean, chair of industry, research and energy (ITRE), climate and industrial policy-making must go hand-in-hand to bring sustainability and prosperity to Europe.

By Elena Sánchez Nicolás

Innovation, research, digitalisation, and infrastructure are set to be the main drivers of the European growth for the next decade.

The European parliament’s committee on industry, research, and energy (ITRE) is one of the largest in the parliament, in terms of legislative footprint, since its principal tasks are to reinforce the EU’s industrial competitiveness and create prosperous jobs.

One of the main tasks of ITRE, chaired by Adina-Ioana Valean, will be to ensure stable and clear legislation that can boost sustainable growth in the EU.

The responsibilities are many. Above all, the European industry strategy 2030 will be one of the main priorities, MEP Valean told EUobserver.

The European industry strategy 2030 aims to develop a more digital, knowledge-based, low-carbon and circular economy while keeping in mind the net-zero emissions target by 2050.

However, the committee will also have to focus on creating a solid framework for new technologies like artificial intelligence and blockchain, ensuring that automation does not become a threat to employment in the EU.

Europe will need blockchain applications to foster digitalisation in its industries, but also big data, 5G connectivity, and security, she said.

As the previous chair of the environmental committee (ENVI), Valean believes that “climate and industrial policy must go hand-in-hand if we want to create growth, jobs, and wellbeing for our citizens”.

As the chair of ITRE, Valean believes that the energy transition must be designed in phases, where gas could be considered sustainable, at least for the first stage, to facilitate the rapid replacement of coal.

However, she regrets that today some actors in the EU parliament still see this as an “antagonistic competition between opposing players”.

“I see that things are moving in the right direction with the [new] commission presented by the president-elect Ursula von der Leyen,” she said.

The committee will have to reach the balance between the successful implementation of complex policies already on the table, and developing and advancing new policies.

“We need to accelerate deployment of new, sustainable and clean-gas technologies for those industrial sectors that cannot be electrified, and for those that can be electrified we need to accelerate the innovation deployment,” she said.

This transition will require substantial investments. But, public funding will not be enough.

European industry will need both public and private investors to be sustainable and successful, said Valean, who describes this transition as “an opportunity to enshrine this partnership for investment and change in EU law”.

As the chair of ITRE, Valean believes that the Green New Deal has to be a cross-sector one where finance, industry, technology, and climate meet and cooperate,” she said.

However, Europe must accelerate the full digitalisation of its industries and services to be able to benefit from the advantages that technology and research can offer.

The coordinators are Christian Ehler (EPP, Germany), Dan Nica (S&D, Romania), Martina Diabajová (Renew, Czech Republic), Ville Niinistö (Greens/EFA, Finland), Paolo Borchia (ID, Italy), Zdzisław Krasnodebski (ECR, Poland) and Marisa Matias (GUE/NGL, Portugal).

At the time of writing Valean was selected by EU commission president Ursula von der Leyen to become the next EU commissioner for transport.
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The fast-growing impact of artificial intelligence will be the biggest challenge for business and consumers in Europe’s single market of tomorrow. By Koert Debeuf

The parliamentary committee for internal market and consumer protection (IMCO) is working on one of the most fundamental principles of the European Union: the single market.

The entire Brexit saga shows once more how difficult it is to leave the single market once you have been a part of it. But also how beneficial it is to be a member of the EU.

After decades of living in a common internal market, many people seem to have forgotten how important it is, and how easy.

But when you travel to for example the United States, and you forget your adapter, you can’t even charge your mobile phone - a problem that never occurs when you travel on the European continent.

The internal market is not only about the free movement of goods and services. It’s also about standards, for products but also for consumer protection. That’s why worldwide people talk about "European standards", as a label of global quality.

It is the task of the IMCO committee to continue strengthening the internal market, in particular in a cross-border context, removing unjustified barriers and ensuring that the existing rules are properly and timely implemented and enforced.

Next to the announced revision of the E-Commerce Directive or new Digital Services Act, the committee will need to have a lot of attention to what De Sutter calls "a single market fit for the digital age".

"Since emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and blockchain, are becoming key drivers for economic development and enhance the value of goods and services, we will be following with the utmost attention any developments in this area", she said, adding that this is important for both business and consumers.

As a fourth major point for IMCO over the next five years, De Sutter mentions a "sustainable Single Market". More concretely, she points out that "addressing the needs of a growing circular economy and the integration of environmental concerns into consumer policy will be a key priority."

A politically-sensitive point that might interfere with the IMCO agenda is the free movement of people.

De Sutter fears that "member states may take disproportionate measures and apply administrative controls and procedures which make free movement more difficult and costly for SMEs going cross-border."

On the one hand, European companies need access to data for developing AI. On the other hand "consumer protection rules have to ensure that consumers have clear information on how to use AI-enabled products and services, that they have control over data generated by such products and services, and how that data is used!", she said.

IMCO coordinators are: Andreas Schwab (EPP, Germany), Christel Schaldemose (S&D, Denmark), Dita Charanzova (Renew, Czech Republic), Marcel Kolaja (Greens/EFA, Czech Republic), Virginie Joron (ID, France), Adam Bielan (ECR, Poland), Katerina Konecna (GUE/NGL, Czech Republic).
Tackling climate change through transport

Getting the mobility package done in the short-term, and helping to change modes of transportation in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, will be key priorities for the transport and tourism committee. By Eszter Zalan

Changing (and charging for) transportation methods are key to effectively fighting climate change, and the European Parliament’s transport committee chair, Karima Delli (Greens/EFA, France), will put that struggle at the top of the agenda.

"The issue of global warming is one of my top priorities. We are facing a big responsibility," the French politician told EUobserver.

"The transport sector accounts for 30 percent of greenhouse gas emissions and has an important responsibility on air pollution (600,000 deaths per year in Europe). This priority translates into objectives by mode of transport," Delli added.

She said she will defend the obligation for all regional and national trains at EU level to have at least eight reserved bicycle spaces to accelerate the pace of soft mobility.

"Cities must seize this means of transport, which is low-carbon and accessible to all", said Delli – who describes herself as an advocate of both train and bicycle. The committee will also enter into negotiations on the text of passenger rights.

The MEP said the committee wants to boost freight by rail by 30 percent per country, launch a rail renovation plan, and "to support a real revival of night trains".

Delli adds that she is campaigning for a heavy-vehicle fee. She wants for each European country to "introduce a heavy goods vehicle tax based on the polluter-pays principle, with revenue earmarked to finance sustainable urban mobility, freight and road safety".

In terms of the aviation package, the committee will look at a kerosene tax, and all possible means to invest in alternatives to flying.

"The sector should no longer benefit from an exemption from fuel tax. Europe can implement it, and bring it to the international level with a single voice, to show that it is possible to work on this issue. This would provide significant funding for alternatives," said Delli, who has chaired the committee since 2017.

Delli also wants to hold a European summit on the "conversion of the automotive industry" in order to work on re-skilling employees, on providing support for regions, and on recycling vehicles. She said that with 12 million workers in the industry, this is an urgent issue.

Delli had also served as the vice-chair of the committee of "inquiry into emission measurements in the automotive sector", which was brought in after the 2015 Dieselgate scandal.

In the maritime sector, Delli said, the committee will start to tighten up the standards for sulphur oxide (SOx) emissions.

"The objective is also to update the air quality directive to the levels recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO)," she said, adding that limits will have to be added for other particles such as PM2.5, which are not included in the current directive.

"There are a number of issues that will divide us, according to institutional, political or geographical divisions. It is essential, especially on divisive issues, to take the time, listen and consult everyone," Delli said, adding that she is determined to defend the parliament’s positions in negotiations with the other institutions.

Coordinators: Marian-Jean Marinescu (EPP, Romania), Johan Danielsson (S&D, Sweden), Jose Ramon Bauza Diaz (Renew, Spain), Ciaran Cuffe (Greens/EFA, Ireland), Roman Haider (ID, Austria), Roberts Zile (ECR, Latvia), Elena Kountoura (GUE/NGL, Greece).
The European Parliament’s committee for regional development (REGI) does not often make headlines in Brussels’ news.

However, for many Europeans it can be precisely these regional funds that make the EU the most visible force of change.

Those who visited central European countries before 2004, or 2007, and went again 10 years later, have no doubt seen the new infrastructure built with European funds.

Therefore, these so-called Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund are at the heart of European policy, aiming at more equality between regions within the EU, by trying to reduce disparities in income, wealth and opportunities.

Together, the two funds form one of the largest budget lines of the European Union.

These lines are fixed within the EU budget for seven years (2014-2020) in the so-called MultiAnnual Financial Framework, but will need to be negotiated again for the following seven years (2021-2027).

Since 2018 a new fund, the Energy Transition Fund, was put in place in order to help poorer regions to reach the climate goals through a transition to green energy.

The political control of the spending of these funds is what the REGI committee does.

According to the committee’s chairman Younous Omarjee (GUE/NGL, France) the main challenge for the coming five years will be controlling “the efficiency and absorption of the cohesion funds, as well as the implementation of reforms aiming at reducing the regional disparities”.

Another challenge, Omarjee continued is “a just transition fund”, or - in other words - finding a way that all European regions “participate in the Paris Agreement objectives”.

On top of that he foresees that the “fight against urban poverty and an ambition for European islands” will top the committee’s agenda for the next five years.

However, two new political realities since the implementation of the 2014-2020 budget will make the discussion on the regional funds more complicated: the migration issue that deeply divided the EU since 2015, and the call by some to put conditions on the respect for the rule of law on the distribution of structural funds.

This new reality will no doubt make the debates about regional development more political and divisive than ever.

Despite that, Omarjee hopes that within five years he can look back and say his committee has "secured a budget for cohesion that allows European solidarity to continue and to reduce territorial inequalities." He is looking forward, he continued "to prove the added value of cohesion and succeed in the objective of simplification."

The coordinators of the REGI committee are Andrei Novakov (EPP, Bulgaria), Constanze Krehl (S&D, Germany), Ondrej Knotek (Renew, Czech Republic), Niklas Nienass (Greens/EFA, Germany), Francesca Donato (ID, Italy), Raffaele Fitto (ECR, Italy), MartinaMichels (GUE/NGL, Germany).
More sustainable agriculture, with less budget

Making the EU’s agriculture policy more efficient, green and sustainable, but with less budget. That is the biggest challenge the committee on agriculture and rural development (AGRI), chaired by German centre-right MEP Norbert Lins, will face. By Elena Sánchez Nicolás

The agricultural sector is one of the world’s most significant sources of greenhouse gas emissions. However, thanks to new technologies and modern farming techniques, emissions linked to agriculture are expected to decrease - keeping in mind the climate targets set by the EU for 2030 and 2050.

During the next five years, the workload being developed by the committee on agriculture and rural development (AGRI), chaired by Norbert Lins, is mainly focused on making the common agricultural policy (CAP) more efficient and sustainable.

However, the Mercosur trade agreement – and its impact on European farmers and the EU’s food chain – will also be priorities on this committee’s agenda, especially since AGRI must ensure that the food coming from third countries has the same standards as here, Lins said.

The CAP is one of the EU’s most important common policies, being dominantly high on the agenda of the European Parliament.

The outgoing European Commission presented in 2018 a legislative reform on the post-2020 CAP, which is seen as one of the most important mechanisms to both support and green environmental and climate action in the EU agricultural and forest sectors.

The AGRI committee in cooperation with the ENVI (committee on environment, public health, and food safety) will work constructively on the proposal of the commission to ensure that the new green deal and the EU agricultural policy will go hand-in-hand.

One of the biggest challenges for this committee will be making the agriculture policy fit the adaption and mitigation of climate change with less budget.

According to Lins, the new eco-schemes and climate measures, as well as the afforestation and bioenergy crops schemes under rural development, are positive aspects of the proposal post-2020 CAP.

Eco-schemes refers to a new stream of funding for the environment and climate from the CAP's direct payments budget, which is mandatory for member states (but the design up to them) and voluntary for farmers.

However, Lins wonders if all these new actions can make much of a difference on their own - “the potential of these elements might be limited also by the budget cuts,” he warned.

Until now, approximately 38 percent of the EU’s budget (€58bn) was spent on agriculture and rural development - equivalent to 0.4 percent of the Union’s GDP.

However, the EU commission proposed to reduce by around five percent the funding for the CAP as the EU will face fewer contributors, with a future union of 27 members.

The implementation of the CAP reform is expected by the beginning of 2021 as the debate over the size and nature of the CAP spending feeds affects the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) - the EU’s long-term budget.

The coordinators of the AGRI committee are Herbert Dorfmann (EPP, Italy), Paolo de Castro (S&D, Italy), Ulrike Müller (Renew, Germany), Martin Häusling (Greens/EFA, Germany), Ivan David (ID, Czech Republic) and Luke Ming Flanagan (GUE/NGL, Ireland).

It is not clear who the coordinator of ECR is.
EU seas will contain "more" and "bigger" fish five years from now if the European Parliament's fisheries committee (PECH) is to be proud of its legacy, according to its chairman, British liberal MEP Chris Davies. But a fight on post-Brexit fishing could divert attention from its core work, the committee's Dutch deputy chair, Peter van Dalen, warned.

"It's all about achieving sustainability - ending overfishing and rebuilding our fish stocks so that we have more fish in the sea and can give a long term secure future for our fishing industry," Davies (Renew, UK) said. EU authorities ought to "tighten controls" on fishing quotas and "stop the discarding of millions of tonnes of fish each year," he added.

The EU is meant to end overfishing by 2020, and 59 out of 81 assessed species were now returning to sustainable levels, according to "strict scientific advice", Davies noted. But "we're bound to miss the target, I fear," the MEP added. "Atlantic waters look good, but the Mediterranean and Black seas are in a terrible state," he said.

The European Commission and EU member states negotiate total allowable catches of fish each year in a process that dominates EU intervention in the European seafood sector, which employs tens of thousands of people, most of them in France, Greece, Italy, Spain, and the UK.

The tension between industry and environment could see clashes inside PECH on how to spend the €6bn European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, Davies warned.

There were "too many people in politics" in some EU states who wanted to "throw public money at the fishing industry ... subsidising new and more powerful vessels", as in the "bad old days", he noted. But that "helps to kill the industry and the coastal communities that depend upon it," Davies said.

The committee's Dutch deputy chair, van Dalen (EPP, Netherlands), agreed with the British MEP on the need for better "control" of the sector, saying that old EU rules were "too out of date". But Davies is to lose his PECH job when the UK leaves the EU, and van Dalen warned that Brexit could frustrate the committee's normal work.

Talk of EU fishing controls triggers strong emotions in British eurosceptics and the tabloid media, which cover the subject as if it was World War Two. The so-called 'Scallop Wars' in 2018 even saw violence when British and French fishermen rammed each other's boats and fired flares, and "future reciprocity, after Brexit, of fishing in EU and British waters", is set to be PECH's most divisive issue, van Dalen said.

The coordinators are: Francisco Millan Mon (EPP, Spain), Clara Aguilera (S&D, Spain); Pierre Karleskind (Renew, France); Grace O'Sullivan (Greens/EFA, Ireland); France Jamet (ID, France); Ruza Tomasic (ECR, Croatia); and Joao Ferreira (GUE/NGL, Portugal).
A bigger Erasmus budget to favour inclusion

One of the top priorities of the European parliament's committee on culture and education (CULT), chaired by centre-right German MEP Sabine Verheyen, is to triple the Erasmus+ budget to make it more inclusive and accessible. By Elena Sánchez Nicolás

One of the most notable aspects of the European Union is the cultural and linguistic diversity of its member states, and how successful programs such as Erasmus+ enhance European multiculturalism through education.

One of the main priorities for the European Parliament's committee on culture and education (CULT), chaired by centre-right Sabine Verheyen (EPP, Germany), is to triple the budget of the Erasmus+ programme from 2021-2027, to make it more inclusive.

The current budget (2014-2020) for the Erasmus+ programme is €14.7bn.

However, a bigger budget is necessary to ensure that the Erasmus+ initiative is "more inclusive and accessible" for people with specific needs or disadvantaged groups, Verheyen told EUobserver.

Erasmus is an initiative designed to allow young people to discover and live European values: learning about other countries, languages, and cultures while developing tolerance and mutual understanding.

"This committee has played a vital role supporting Erasmus+ and ensuring that it is implemented well," she said.

However, one of the main challenges for the CULT committee will be to find the balance between the different stakeholders during the ongoing inter-institutional negotiations - especially considering that the proposal of the commission only doubles the funding for Erasmus 2021-2027 up to €30bn.

For the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), this committee will have to reach a political agreement with the EU Council not only on the Erasmus+ programme, but also Creative Europe (for culture and the creative sector) and European Solidarity Corps (for volunteering).

"I know my colleagues following those files are committed to achieving an excellent result. It is imperative that we get it right," Verheyen said.

The committee will also focus its efforts for the next five years on the implementation of the updated audiovisual media service directive (AVMSD), and the new forthcoming revision of the e-commerce directive.

Once the new AVMSD is implemented, the parliament will have to ensure that the revision of the e-commerce directive does not jeopardise the achievements made concerning the regulation of video-sharing platform services like YouTube, she said.

Likewise, digital skills, media literacy, and new technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) will present fresh challenges for the CULT Committee.

According to Verheyen, even though AI is still not completely understood or adequately addressed within European policy-making, "it will have an increasing impact on cultural and creative industries, as well as on education".

The coordinators of the CULT committee are Michaela Šojdrova (EPP, Czech Republic), Petra Kammerervert (S&D, Germany), Laurence Farreng (Renew, France), Salima Yenbou (Greens/EFA, France), Christine Anderson (ID, Germany), Dace Melbrde (ECR, Latvia) and Niyazi Kizilyürek (GUE/NGL, Cyprus).

Chairwoman Sabine Verheyen (EPP, Germany). The proposal of the EU commission doubles the funding for Erasmus 2021-2027, up to €30bn.

Photo: European Parliament
AI’s ethical dilemma

Last year, the European Commission presented a strategy paper on how the EU should take the lead shaping the ethics of Artificial Intelligence. It is a challenge the JURI committee has tasked itself to complete over the next five years. By Nikolaj Nielsen

The legal affairs committee, also known as JURI, made headlines this year when it de-throned European Commission designates, over conflicts of interests.

The move helped cement the enforcement status of a European Parliament that had in the past struggled to gain an equal foothold with member state capitals.

Lucy Nethsingha presides over JURI and is a UK national from Southampton, whose home country is prying itself away from the European Union.

A Liberal Democrat belonging to the Renew Europe group, Nethsingha however still maintains a long-term vision for a committee she may soon have to leave. The committee is responsible for the interpretation, application and monitoring of Union law.

She ranks Artificial Intelligence (AI) and climate change as among JURI’s biggest priorities over the next five years.

Nethsingha says JURI’s work on AI will have a particular impact on start-ups, as it hopes to help shape AI development and roll-out.

The committee’s coordinators are looking at four broad areas, amid plans to draw up initiative reports on each: on an ethical framework, on state authority, on liability, and on intellectual property rights.

"A proper and balanced regulation on ethical aspects and on liability will help to build trust in this new technology," she says.

Those coordinators include Axel Voss (EPP, Germany), Tiemo Wölken (S&D, Germany), Karen Melchior (Renew, Denmark), Marie Toussaint (Greens/EFA, France), Gilles Lebreton (ID, France), Angel Dzhambazki (ECR, Bulgaria) and Manon Aubry (GUE/NGL, France).

If it works out, Nethsingha says getting the own initiative reports sorted and taken up by the commission would become the committee's biggest achievement.

Climate change will also figure large as JURI’s input aims to untangle thorny issues like company law.

"We already know that the commission is preparing proposals on the question of sustainable corporate governance," says Nethsingha.

It means, among other things, that the committee will have to figure out if company obligations should only deal with sustainability in a climate change sense, or in a wider environmental sense.

Building machines that can reason and learn poses a slew of ethical questions. Some warn that the intelligence revolution in machines could lead to self-awareness, otherwise known as 'the singularity'.

Getting the right balance when it comes to the ethical aspects of artificial intelligence will likely be among the most difficult questions that will be posed in JURI.

Nethsingha says that balance needs to be weighed against AI’s innovation, development and deployment.

"On the most divisive question, it is of course difficult to tell, but I think that our agenda will include questions regarding how far the duties of companies will stretch," she says.

Figuring out to what extent a company should have these duties and responsibilities in regard to their supply chains will also be difficult, notes Nethsingha.

"The most divisive question may be the nature of any obligations. Should they be mandatory or advisory? What should the consequences be if the rules are not followed?" she says.
The European Parliament’s civil liberties committee offers a snapshot of the European “state of mind”, says its chair Juan Fernando Lopez Aguilar. Its biggest challenge will be getting member states to unblock the EU asylum package.

By Nikolaj Nielsen

Article 80 of the Lisbon Treaty says European Union policies must be governed by the principles of solidarity and fair sharing of responsibility.

It is an article that Spanish socialist MEP Juan Fernando Lopez Aguilar often repeats in the face of the major backlash among member states when it comes to overhauling the EU’s complex asylum system.

As chair of the European Parliament’s civil liberties committee (LIBE), Aguilar is faced with a daunting task to pressure capitals into applying article 80 in practice.

His coordinators may choose to work with him or against him.

On the EPP side is Roberta Metsola (Malta). The socialists have Birgit Sippel (S&D, Germany), the liberals Sophie In’t Veld (Renew, Netherlands), plus there is Terry Reintke (Greens/EFA, Germany) and Tineke Srik (Greens/EFA, Netherlands).

There is also Annalisa TARDINO (ID, Italy), Patryk Tomasz JAKI (ECR, Poland), Cornelia Ernst (GUE/NGL, Germany) listed as a provisional coordinator.

LIBE’s biggest challenge over the next five years will be getting the EU Council, representing member states, to unblock the asylum package.

If Aguilar succeeds, it will also be the committee’s biggest achievement.

‘Dublin’, a regulation that determines who is responsible for processing asylum applications, remains the most contentious item in the package as EU states baulk over a provision to share out people seeking international protection.

Aguilar is not shy about his committee flexing its muscles in the face of an uncompromising council, telling EUobserver that member states have to understand that migration and asylum are no longer solely issues for national legislators.

“We need a positive approach, we need a constructive approach and we need to cooperate, both co-legislators, the council and the European parliament, to have that legislation adopted. That would be, in my view, the number one priority,” he said.

But he also directed some of his complaints towards the upcoming European commission under president-elect Ursula von der Leyen, saying the cross-cutting nature of the files will make it more difficult to hold the future commissioners to account.

Von den Leyen has promised a new pact on migration. Details remain sparse. “Protecting the European Way of Life” (previously migration), home affairs, transparency, justice and equality are all spread across five commissioners and in ways that are difficult to delineate.

Aguilar says security is a second priority.

It means making sure the security package aligns with fundamental rights and respects the principles of necessity and proportionality, he says.

Among the big files is tackling terrorist content online, plus e-privacy, and e-evidence. The inter-operability of EU-level security and police databases is also key.

But having to deal with some of the most politically toxic issues also means LIBE is bound to attract a diverse range of views.

Aguilar describes his committee as a snapshot of the European “state of mind” - with MEPs who oppose the European Union and dabble in hate speech.

“The LIBE committee is always the busiest committee in the house, very active, very intense, debates are often passionate, the issues are hot and divisive,” he said.
As EU leaders are keen to transform the way politics is formulated in the bloc, the constitutional affairs committee will play a key role in the next five years in reforming electoral processes and initiating laws. By Eszter Zalan

As a former president of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani is a powerful chairman of the constitutional affairs committee (AFCO), and one who wants the EU parliament to be able to initiate legislation.

"The European parliament is the only chamber directly-elected by citizens that does not hold the right of initiative," the Italian MEP from Forza Italia points out to EUobserver.

This is a priority for his committee in the next five years, and he also wants the parliament to have the right of inquiry.

"I know that these are ambitious goals," he adds, but says the EU elections in May have given these efforts a boost.

"The recent elections showed an important increase of participation. For this reason, we must answer to the raising voice of European citizens," Tajani said, adding: "the EU needs to change immediately, and to strengthen the link between institutions and citizens".

Tajani said that with his fellow MEPs on the committee, they will put "all our efforts to push forward all the proposals aimed at increasing the role of the European parliament".

He also welcomed EU commission president-elect Ursula von der Leyen's proposals for a conference on the Future of Europe, which would start in 2020 and run for two years to bring together citizens, according to her plans.

"In my opinion, it is a key instrument to listen to our citizens' needs and concerns and, on that base, to reform deeply the European Union," Tajani said.

Tajani said he hopes to speed up the process of institutional reforms.

"In this regard, the AFCO committee already invited many scholars and researchers, from all over Europe, in order to investigate a potential implementation of the right of initiative," he said.

He said the committee's work in the next five years will shape the future Europe, from the right of inquiry to the Future of Europe conference, through the reform of the lead candidate process (dubbed 'Spitzenkandidaten' based on the idea's German origins), to electoral law and transparency issues.

"We must work hard to have a better Europe during this legislative term," Tajani said.

Steering clear of the controversial issues, Tajani said the committee is "united in working for a better and more functioning union".

"Of course, there are different views, based on political differences and values. As chair, my role is to give voice to everyone in order to have every political groups' contribution to the major debates," he added.

The Coordinators are Danuta Hubner (EPP, Poland), Domenec Ruiz Devesa (S&D, Spain), Pascal Durand (Renew, France), Daniel Freund (Greens/EFA, Germany), Gerolf Annemans (ID, Belgium), Geert Bourgeois (ECR, Netherlands), Martina Anderson (GUE/NGL, Ireland).
Women’s Rights and Gender Equality

Binding measures to expand gender balance

Ursula von der Leyen, the first female president of the EU commission, has put a lot of emphasis on trying to create a gender-balanced EU executive. Expanding gender balance will also be a top priority for the FEMM committee. By Eszter Zalan

Regner said an understanding must be established that "real equality requires action in all political areas: in short, gender mainstreaming".

It means that all policy concepts or planned actions should be assessed at all stages by how it effects different genders. The EU treaty commits to eliminating inequalities and promoting the principle of equality between women and men.

The gender mainstreaming amendments have allowed the women’s rights and gender equality committee (FEMM) to introduce a gender perspective into the reports of other committees on specific issues.

"We will take concrete action regarding income equality, work-life balance and the fight against violence against women," Regner added.

In the next five years the priority will be producing more, and binding, measures to promote gender equality.

"We must achieve a binding EU gender equality strategy," Regner said, pointing to a recently published equality index by the European Institute for Gender Equality.

The report said that the EU continues at a snail’s pace when it comes to gender equality progress.

The report said that Sweden continues to top the EU scoreboard for gender equality, followed by Denmark, and with Greece and Hungary having the most catching-up to do. The biggest improvement was achieved by Portugal and Estonia.

"We have a quite clear understanding of the existing layers of inequality reaching from the economic situation to political representation and the social situation of women in Europe," Regner said, referring to the report.

"The verdict is clear, we need to take more measures faster. The status quo in matters of equality is far from satisfactory," she said.

Regner expects that the most divisive issues will be all matters "touching upon sexual and reproductive rights of women", which show "a clear divide between member states and political groups".

"It shows that women’s rights are at risk once again. What has been achieved can easily be lost again. In this regard, I want to strengthen the role of the European parliament as a guarantor of women’s rights in Europe," she said.

Regner added that what often lies behind the regression is a misconception of what family means.

Yet the world is so colourful, she added, saying there are many different ways of life. "And basically, that is what it’s all about. That everyone is able to lead their lives without compulsion, pressure or fear", Regner added.

Coordinators (to be confirmed): Frances Fitzgerald (EPP, Ireland), Maria Noichl (S&D, Germany), Irene Tolleret (Renew, France), Alice Kuhnke (Greens/EFA, Sweden), Christine Anderson (ID, Germany), Jadwiga Wisniewska (ECR, Poland), Sandra Pereira (GUE/NGL, Portugal).
Ordinary EU citizens should get a say in Brussels lawmaking and hold officials to account via the European Parliament's petitions committee (PETI) in the next five years, according to its chairman, Spanish centre-right MEP Dolors Montserrat. By Andrew Rettman

"We need to give more visibility to personal experiences, enabling citizens to contribute to the EU's legislative work, while also bringing them closer to MEPs and making institutions more accountable," Montserrat said. "Institutions have to be at the service of people and not the other way around," she added.

PETI has a mandate to discuss EU nationals or companies' grievances on any subject governed by European laws.

It exerts soft power, which "sometimes" amounted to "considerable influence", Montserrat said, by issuing reports and recommendations.

It can prompt plenary debates, dispatch fact-finding missions, send memos to EU states' embassies, or even call for commission legal action against European countries.

And it regularly invites individuals to confront MEPs and European Commission officials in grand auditoriums in the EU capital.

PETI stands alongside the European Ombudsman (a malpractice watchdog) and the European Citizens' Initiative (filing mass petitions to the commission) as one of few ways enshrined in the EU treaties for people to get directly involved in times of sharp division between 'masses' and 'elites'.

The "most important point is that petitioners feel heard and protected," Montserrat said.

In one petition last year, 'E.P.' (a German national), got to voice "her opposition to the establishment of the European Defence Fund", a €13bn EU juggernaut project on joint arms procurement.

Other petitions, which trickle in at a rate of five or so per day via PETI's website, dealt with electoral standards, free press, and anti-Islamic hate speech. They also dealt with disabled people's rights, sexual education, and cannabis laws, as well as with smaller issues, such as a Polish petition on the distance between school desks or an Italian one on letting dogs fly with their owners.

Montserrat, a 46-year old Catalan, who was health minister under former Spanish leader Marian Rajoy, is no stranger to division between remote capitals and popular feeling. The Rajoy government in Madrid tried to crush Catalan independence in 2017, emboldening popular resistance.

But the MEP said: "We need to work for equal consideration of petitions, regardless of their political colour". The European Parliament represented "a diversity of opinions and ideologies," Montserrat said, and "in a democracy like our own, it is normal for us to have different points of view".

PETI's European Parliament group coordinators are: Peter Jahr (EPP, Germany), Jude Kirton-Darling (S&D, UK), Yana Toom (Renew, Estonia), Margrete Auken (Greens/EFA, Denmark), Gianna Gancia (ID, Italy), Kosma Zotowski (ECR, Poland), and Sira Rego (GUE/NGL, Spain).

Dolors Montserrat (EPP, Spain), chair of the petitions committee, wants to hear more from EU citizens.

Photo: Council of the European Union
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