

CONSIDERATIONS ON THE INITIATIVES TO REFORM THE EUROPEAN INTERINSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Associate Professor Mihaela Adina APOSTOLACHE, PhD.
Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiesti, Romania
mihapostolache@yahoo.com

Abstract

The setting of priorities at EU level is always carried out following consultations between EU leaders, member state ministers, EU institutions and political groups in the European Parliament. Within the EU institutional system, the European Parliament is at the heart of European democracy, as it is the only EU institution directly elected by European citizens. The European Parliament is the one who initiated the reform process to strengthen its institutional role and capacity for action within the European decision-making mechanism. This will also have effects on the European interinstitutional framework in the period 2024-2029.

Keywords: *priorities, initiatives, reform, interinstitutional agreement, capacity for action*

1. Preamble

The construction of the European Union was based, ever since its establishment, on the idea of economic integration, starting with the European Coal and Steel Community and up to the Single Market, namely the Economic and Monetary Union. The subsequent evolution of the European Union showed that economic progress is closely linked to social progress, that a competitive and sustainable economy cannot be founded in the absence of policies for the protection of the workforce or social protection, education and training. Even though the development model aimed at “a highly competitive market social economy, which tends towards full employment and social progress” [1], the social dimension of the EU most often remained in the background, returning to the agenda of European decision-makers especially when there was a need for a repositioning of social elements, in the context of the implementation of economic policies.

Moreover, the challenges that the EU has been recently facing, in parallel with the visible increase in the gaps between regions or the increased vulnerability of certain social categories, have led to an increased interest in tracking social progress and how social objectives are integrated into the broader development framework. It is undeniable that the priorities shaping the European political agenda until 2029 include this aspect as well.

2. Setting priorities at the European Union level

The European elections in June 2024 represented an opportunity for the EU to establish a series of priorities, which were included on its political agenda until 2029. These priorities aim to address the main challenges faced by both the EU as a whole and its citizens.

The establishment of priorities is always carried out following consultations between EU leaders, member state ministers, EU institutions and political groups from the European Parliament. Thus, in June 2024, before the start of the new legislature, the heads of state or government of all member states, reunited within the European Council, established the EU official political priorities for the next 5 years, which were then included in the *EU's Strategic Agenda for the period 2024-2029*. The document is intended to guide the EU institutions, defining ways to achieve these priorities. The task of implementing them lies with the EU institutions, but also with the governments of the member states, who work together towards this common goal.

The European Commission, based on this agenda, has identified its political priorities before the start of its 5-year mandate. These summarise the main policies and steps it intends to take to achieve its objectives. The Commission's priorities are presented in the plenary session of the European Parliament, transformed into mission statements addressed to each Commissioner-designate and presented before the relevant committee of the Parliament. The political guidelines thus defined form the basis of the *Commission's annual work programme*, which includes the initiatives designed to give substance to the priorities over the next 12 months.

After the adoption of the Commission Work Programme, the three European institutions, the Commission, the Parliament and the Council, issue a joint declaration on the EU's priorities for the coming year. This allows for swift action and ensures that political focus is placed on delivering the defined priorities.

To allow for longer-term planning, the three EU institutions also adopt annual joint declarations on legislative priorities for the following year during the five-year mandate.

3. European Union priorities for 2024-2029: reforms to strengthen European democracy

At the European level, the trend of the last twenty years has been that of globalization and the intensive development of social systems, relating to the values and objectives promoted within the Union space. In this context, the member states have been put in a position where the institutions and administrative systems have to be flexible in order to constantly adapt to these transformations. Thus, cooperation between national administrations and European institutions has become vital for the smooth functioning of the entire process.

Within the EU institutional system, the European Parliament is at the heart of European democracy, as it is the only institution of the Union directly elected by European citizens. This is also why it is considered the voice of European citizens, and within the EU institutional balance it is recognised as having several qualities: co-legislator, component of the budgetary authority, as well as guarantor of political and financial accountability and transparency.

It is the European Parliament the one to initiate the next stage of a reform process to strengthen its internal working methods, as well as its institutional role and capacity to act, to ensure that it is and remains well equipped to carry out its tasks under the Treaties [2] and to meet the expectations of EU citizens.

Thus, in January 2023, the Conference of Presidents of the European Parliament agreed on the need for internal reforms. The reform process at European level had to focus on actions that generate tangible and immediate results that would complement the actions of governments and that must be clearly linked to the immediate concerns of the people and unequivocally target issues of European or global importance.

The proposal made by the President of the European Parliament [3] was adopted by the Conference of Presidents, which set up a working group on parliamentary reform, composed of representatives of all political groups. The work group aimed to examine the proposals received throughout the year on how to improve the efficiency of the procedures of the European Parliament.

On the 22nd November 2023, the European Parliament adopted, with a slight majority (305 votes for, 276 against and 29 abstentions for the report, respectively 291 for, 274 against and 44 abstentions for the resolution), the proposals for revision of the treaties [4] in order to enable a European Union with more than 30 member states to function more democratically and to be able to successfully face the great challenges of the future. The text supports a reform of the EU's institutional architecture through a targeted revision of the two constituent treaties [5] and invites the European Council to convene, as soon as possible in this regard, a convention in accordance with the ordinary procedure provided for in art. 48 para. 2-5 of the EU Treaty. According to this report, which describes in detail the areas where European policies and institutions need to be reformed, Parliament charts the way forward. The experience of the Conference on the future of Europe in 2022 [6] highlighted a strong will of European citizens to contribute directly to the future of the community project.

Based on the mandate set by the European Parliament group leaders, the work group analysed possible improvements in the areas of *legislation, control, budgetary functions and budgetary control*, and also examined the elements for reforming *plenary sessions* and the Parliament's approach to *external relations*. The debates were intense and included several months of analysis and reflection, and the package of proposals drawn up by the working group, chaired by President Metsola and supported by the political group leaders within the Conference of Presidents, was approved in April 2024.

Once implemented, these reforms will ensure a better functioning of the Parliament as a co-legislator, a decision-maker with budgetary authority and a discharge authority. They will also enhance the Parliament's capacity to exercise democratic scrutiny.

The aim was to implement the reforms before the European elections in June 2024, so that they would support the newly elected Parliament from the outset. Some measures are transposed into the Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament, which were finalised and adopted before the end of the parliamentary mandate.

It can be noted that changes have been made to the Rules of Procedure [7] of the European Parliament aimed at increasing the effectiveness of this European institution, while contributing to achieving more coherent final general positions. This would also be possible through simplified cooperation between the coordinating committees and the

committees issuing opinions. The method of allocating new legislative proposals to committees is considered more efficient, potentially reducing conflicts of competence.

As for the *legislative process*, the mechanisms for verification and control have been improved. The new Article 214 of the Rules of Procedure stipulates the possibility for the Conference of Presidents “to propose, in exceptional cases where a large matter falls within the competence of more than three committees, without the competence of any of them prevailing, the setting up of a temporary legislative committee to deal with a specific proposal for a legally binding act or a pre-legislative strategic document”.

In addition, the recourse to the “emergency procedure” [8] provided for in the revised Article 170 is now much clearer, in order to ensure respect for the legislative prerogatives of the deputies of the European Parliament.

Improvements to *the EP’s scrutiny role* are also evident, as the new hearing format, “special scrutiny hearings”, will allow the Parliament to address issues of major political importance in a timely and in-depth manner. The process of hearing Commissioners will be simplified and more flexibility will be introduced. The new Article 138 bypasses the ordinary legislative procedure, which can undermine the Parliament’s role as co-legislator if used arbitrarily. In practice, the new accountability mechanism aims to better monitor the European Commission when it invokes Article 122 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).

The ability of the European Parliament to hold the executive accountable, provided for in the new Article 141 of the Rules of Procedure, somewhat similar to the political control exercised by national parliaments over the government, reinforces the key elements of the reform. The special scrutiny hearings, subject to approval by the Conference of Presidents, allow the Parliament to invite Commissioners to speak on issues of major political importance.

In the area of the *competencies and responsibilities of the standing committees and the list of standing delegations*, any feasible change needs to be discussed within the political groups and, if necessary, forwarded to the Conference of Presidents for a decision to be taken in this respect.

One aspect taken into account is the transparency of the activity of the European Parliament (revised Article 129 and Annex VII to the Rules of Procedure). It thus provides

that in the run-up to the confirmation hearings of the Commissioners-designate, the elected President of the Commission must provide details of the planned structure, portfolios, responsibilities and gender balance, thus making the process more transparent. This will also allow the Parliament to simplify and accelerate the allocation of responsibilities to committees in the context of the confirmation hearings, clarifying their role.

In line with the smooth running of the *plenary session*, the intention is, among other things, to provide more opportunities for the enhanced cooperation between MEPs. In addition, for key legislative files, debates or statements in plenary should be scheduled throughout the entire legislative process, for example immediately after a Commission proposal is presented. Furthermore, a new format of debate (the “Parliament statement”), concluded with a resolution, would allow the Parliament to express its position and define its priorities not only in response to introductory remarks of the Council or the Commission, thus underlining the Parliament’s role in setting the agenda. The “Parliament statement” represents a new tool that offers the institution the opportunity to express its position on issues without having to react to remarks by the Council or the Commission [9]. It also ensures that the Members of the Commission answer questions relevant to their portfolio and that will improve the sessions dedicated to “Question Time”. Question time could be dedicated to the entire College of Commissioners or several Vice-Presidents of the Commission to cover broad areas.

MEPs also approved the principle of holding special scrutiny debates with Commissioners once per plenary session, without a predefined topic (Article 143 on Question Time).

Concerning *budget and discharge issues*, cooperation between committees will be improved through an integrated approach to budgets, discharge and legislation, in order to fully exploit the Parliament’s combined institutional power over budgetary and legislative matters. All legislative proposals affecting the EU budget will be subject to an in-depth assessment to check that the Parliament’s political priorities are duly taken into account.

The Parliament will also improve cooperation between sectoral policy committees and budgetary control committees to allow for meaningful association of information

collected throughout the budgetary cycle (budget and discharge stages). This strengthened link will benefit the legislative and scrutiny work of sectoral committees and will also enhance scrutiny of instruments that are “non-traditional” or outside the EU budget. In this way, the work of sectoral committees will be better integrated and mutually reinforced with the horizontal aspects of the activity of the budget and budgetary control committees, and more resources will be allocated to overseeing the implementation of the EU budget.

In terms of *external relations*, the Parliament will shift from a parliamentary body-based approach to a country-based approach. Cooperation between delegations and committees will be strengthened with a view to achieving increasingly effective parliamentary diplomacy. For example, missions will be more agenda-based, systematically involving a pool of MEPs from committees and delegations. The Parliament’s approach to external relations will be reshaped [10], with a clearer focus on key issues when it comes to the plenary agenda, as well as a better coordination and cooperation between committees and standing delegations, in order to strengthen the coherence of the Parliament’s external action and to take full account of the interconnections between the internal and external dimensions of EU policy.

Within the negotiations between the European Parliament and the European Commission, in particular on elements affecting interinstitutional cooperation and to ensure proper examination of the Commission by Parliament, the President of the European Parliament and the President of the European Commission agreed on a set of new principles aimed at strengthening cooperation between the European Parliament and the European Commission. “The revision of the Interinstitutional Framework Agreement will strengthen the relations between our institutions, will ensure greater transparency and better dialogue, (...) will help our institutions to work continuously and deliver results for our citizens. Following our political agreement, work at technical level will start immediately” [11]. To this end, a joint declaration was signed on 21 October 2024 by the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, and the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen.

The Agreement on enhanced interinstitutional cooperation contains the political principles agreed between the President of the European Parliament and the President

of the European Commission, which would form the basis for the revision of the 2010 Framework Agreement on the relations between the European Parliament and the European Commission. These principles include: the principle of equal treatment of the Parliament and the Council and the Commission's role as an honest intermediary, in particular by ensuring the flow of full, timely and detailed information to the Parliament; strengthening the political accountability of the Commission by ensuring the presence of Commissioners in the Parliament (plenary, committees); a commitment to provide full justifications and information on exceptional cases where Commission proposals are based on Article 122 of the TFEU; a commitment to define a clear mechanism for the use of urgent/fast-track decision-making process; modernising the provisions on the exchange of confidential information; strengthening interinstitutional cooperation in budgetary matters by the Commission and presenting a proposal for a new interinstitutional agreement, the content of which will have to be agreed upon by the three institutions.

The European Parliament has sought to respond promptly and effectively to the crises that have occurred during the 2019-2024 legislative mandate. These events have influenced the work of identifying the areas in which Parliament needs to become even better and more efficient. The new rules that entered into force on 16 July 2024 improve its internal functioning and strengthen the institutional balance that is essential for the European Union to work for all European citizens.

4. Conclusions

The European society is undergoing a process of change in which all economic, social, political and civic elements have experienced a new dynamic in an attempt to adapt to the current conditions. The European institutions are also involved in this effort to change, so that the entire decision-making mechanism can function efficiently, fulfil its tasks under the Treaties, and meet the expectations of EU citizens. It is therefore imperative that the Union institutions cooperate to achieve the aspirations of European citizens.

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