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Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs

Employment and Social Policy issues

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President **Marius-Constantin Budăi**
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P R E S S

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¹ • Where declarations, conclusions or resolutions have been formally adopted by the Council, this is indicated in the heading for the item concerned and the text is placed between quotation marks.
 • Documents for which references are given in the text are available on the Council's internet site (<http://www.consilium.europa.eu>).
 • Acts adopted with statements for the Council minutes which may be released to the public are indicated by an asterisk; these statements are available on the Council's internet site or may be obtained from the Press Office.

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ITEMS DEBATED

EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL POLICY

European Semester

Ministers held a policy debate on the European Semester 2019, based on a presidency steering note ([6623/19](#)) entitled "The European Pillar of Social Rights – an initiative for improving the functioning of the labour market and social protection systems across the EU". The aim of the debate was to identify new ways to promote reliable and flexible labour relations, combined with adequate support during transitions.

Ministers were invited to reflect on the following issues:

- What action could be taken in the context of the European Pillar of Social Rights in order to better link employment and social protection policies?
- What (new) instruments are needed at European level in order to strengthen national and local initiatives to create quality jobs leading to inclusive growth?
- Based on the experience gained in the European Semester cycles, which reforms are needed to effectively combat unemployment?

There was a common understanding that the implementation of the principles set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights had to be supported by the allocation of adequate resources in order to increase employment opportunities, especially for those furthest away from the labour market. Ministers agreed that the link between employment and social protection was very important. In this connection, the key role of a stronger cohesion policy was highlighted, in particular within the framework of the upcoming negotiations on the MFF. Ministers also agreed that it was important to create a growth-friendly environment through enhanced investment and improved workers' skills. Upskilling and reskilling were identified as priority actions, with some countries stressing that anticipating the challenges and updating skills regularly, while workers were still employed, was also of key importance. To this end adequate resources should be provided.

During the debate it was highlighted that special attention needed to be paid to several groups of people deemed to be the most vulnerable on the labour market:

- young people
- long-term unemployed people
- disabled people
- older people
- people with a migrant background.

The persisting gender inequality was also identified among the problematic areas.

Joint Employment Report

The Council adopted the Joint Employment Report 2019 (JER) ([6167/19](#)). The JER will now be submitted to the European Council on 21-22 March, in line with Article 148 (1) of the TFEU, to "consider the employment situation and adopt conclusions thereon".

The JER provides an annual overview of the main employment and social developments, as well as member states' reform actions, in line with the Guidelines for the Employment Policies of the member states. The reporting on these reforms focuses on:

- boosting demand for labour
- enhancing labour supply and improving access to employment, skills and competences
- enhancing the functioning of labour markets and the effectiveness of social dialogue
- promoting equal opportunities for all, fostering social inclusion and combatting poverty.

The Joint Employment Report also monitors member states' performance in relation to the Social Scoreboard accompanying the European Pillar of Social Rights. The report looks at the main labour market and social trends in the European Union and the main results from the analysis of the social scoreboard associated with the European Pillar of Social Rights, and provides a detailed cross-country description of key indicators (including from the Social Scoreboard) and policies implemented by member states to address the Guidelines for Employment Policies.

Conclusions on the 2019 Annual Growth Survey and Joint Employment Report

Ministers adopted Conclusions on the 2019 Annual Growth Survey and Joint Employment Report [\(6635/19\)](#). The Conclusions are intended to contribute to conveying the main messages from EPSCO to the European Council on 21-22 March.

The 2019 AGS 'For a stronger Europe in the face of global uncertainty' aims at encouraging sustained economic and social convergence on the basis of the 'virtuous triangle' of economic policy priorities: relaunching investment, pursuing structural reforms and ensuring responsible public finances. In the context of sustained but less dynamic economic growth in Europe, the 2019 AGS sets the following priorities to guide national reform plans and efforts at EU level:

- high-quality investment and targeting investment gaps in research and innovation, in education, training and skills and infrastructure
- reforms that increase productivity growth, inclusiveness and institutional quality
- ensuring macroeconomic stability and sound public finances.

2019 Country Reports

As part of the European Semester, the Commission presented the 2019 Country Reports [\(6560/19\)](#). This presentation will be followed by the Commission's proposal on the draft country-specific recommendations (CSRs), which are expected in May 2019.

The Country Reports, which since 2015 have been presented as one document per MS, combine the prior In-Depth Reviews (IDRs) and Staff Working Documents (SWDs) which underpinned the CSRs. Publishing them before the CSRs is intended to allow MS and COM to discuss the analytical underpinning of the draft CSRs in a timely and in-depth manner.

European Globalisation Adjustment Fund

The Council reached a partial general approach (Council position) on the proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund (EGF) (6842/19). The position does not cover the budgetary aspects or provisions of a horizontal nature, pending further progress on the next multiannual financial framework (MFF).

The fund will provide financing which will be used to improve the skills and employability of workers who have lost their jobs. While some countries expressed reservations concerning the continuation of the fund, the majority of the member states supported the proposal and the Council position. They highlighted in particular the real added value of the EGF and welcomed its autonomy as well as the lowering of the threshold for eligibility, the widening of the scope to include new reasons for restructuring and the higher co-financing rate.

The Council position also provides for the alignment of the period of functioning of the EGF with the period of the MFF from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2027. It also adds the major changes in the EU's trade relations and the composition of the internal market to the globalisation-related challenges causing unexpected major restructuring events.

The aim of the Commission's proposal from May 2018 (9701/18) is to renew the EGF as a special instrument allowing the Union to support member states where unexpected major restructuring events occur, particularly events caused by globalisation-related challenges, such as changes in world trade patterns, trade disputes, financial or economic crises or the transition to a low-carbon economy.

For more details, see [press release](#).

Developing adult skills

Over lunch ministers held a debate on **Developing adult skills**, based on a presidency steering note ([6761/19](#)). They were invited to reflect on the following questions:

- In what areas is European cooperation necessary in order to strengthen adult learning with a view to meeting the needs of the rapidly changing labour markets?
- How could national funding systems be developed to support the massive upskilling and reskilling needs of the adult population? How can European funding best complement funding at the national level?
- Who are the key partners in bringing these efforts forward?

The debate took place in the context of rapid technological developments and growing demand for different skills in the labour market, which present considerable challenges for the education and vocational training systems and for workers.

Social dimension of Europe post 2020

Ministers held a policy debate based on a discussion paper prepared by the presidency ([6622/19](#)). The topic was the "Social dimension of Europe post 2020". The aim of the debate was to provide input to the ongoing sectoral debates about the future of the European Union. These sectoral contributions will be discussed by the Heads of States or Government on 9 May 2019 at the [European Council](#) in Sibiu (Romania).

Ministers were invited to share their views on the following questions:

- What are the key aspects which should define the future social dimension?
- Bearing in mind that the European Pillar of Social Rights provides a compass for a renewed process of upward convergence, what would be the priority action areas for the EU and the Member States in order to preserve and improve the European social model post-2020?

Ministers agreed that social policy issues should be taken into account in all other policy areas and recognised that citizens very often claimed that Europe lacked a social dimension. It was highlighted that there was a clear need to work on upward social convergence and to dedicate more effort to bridging the gaps between different member states in the area of social policy. In order to tackle this problem, ministers agreed that cross-sectoral cooperation was very important and that a strong social dimension could only be achieved through joint efforts. At the same time it was pointed out that the EU had to take into account the various social models in different member states, in particular those where social partners or local authorities had an important role to play in setting labour law and social security rules.

Ministers also identified several challenges which will have to be tackled in the future, in particular in relation to the social dimension of Europe beyond 2020:

- demographic changes
- globalisation
- digitalisation
- automation

The debate took place in the context of remaining disparities between and within member states and persistent economic and social imbalances, which may put at risk economic and social convergence. Against this background, the EU recognizes the clear need to strengthen the social dimension of Europe, building on the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Other business

– *Tripartite Social Summit*

Ministers were briefed by the presidency and the Commission on the *Tripartite Social Summit* which will take place on 20 March.

The main theme of the summit will be "For a stronger, united and forward-looking Europe ". The three more specific sub-themes will be:

- 50 years of labour mobility – making the best of free movement of workers for well-functioning labour markets;
- Delivering investments in a deeper and fairer Single Market; and
- Building on the New Start for Social Dialogue to shape the new world of work.

– *Implementation of the Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways*

The Commission informed the Council on the Implementation of the Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways ([7199/19](#)), based on a recently published report.

– *Current legislative proposals*

The presidency briefed ministers on a large number of **current legislative proposals** in the fields of employment, labour law, and health and safety at work:

- Directive on the accessibility requirements for products and services ([14799/19](#))
- Directive on work-life balance ([8633/17](#))
- Revision of Directive on carcinogens and mutagens (3rd batch) ([7733/18](#))
- Directive on transparent and predictable working conditions ([16018/17](#))

- Regulation on establishing a European labour authority ([7203/18](#))
- Revision of the regulations on the coordination of social security systems (883/04 and 987/09) ([15642/16](#))

On the revision of the regulations on the coordination of social security systems, some member states expressed their concerns on the direction of the negotiations with the European parliament (EP), but the majority of the ministers showed support and urged the presidency to try to reach an agreement within the current term of the EP.

- ***Electronic Exchange of Social Security Information (EESSI)***

The Commission briefed ministers on the state of play of the Electronic Exchange of Social Security Information (EESSI) ([6986/19](#)).

The Commission recalled that it had made the central EESSI system available to Member States in July 2017 and that member states had committed to finalising their national implementation of EESSI by July 2019. It is however estimated that in July 2019 only 60% of the member states will be able to implement the system.

- ***High-Level Conference on the EU Framework on National Strategies for Roma Inclusion***

The presidency informed ministers about the outcome of the recent High-Level Conference on Roma Inclusion ([7003/19](#)) which took place in Bucharest, 4-5 March.

- ***EMCO and SPC Work Programmes 2019***

The chairpersons of the Employment Committee (EMCO) and the Social Protection Committee (SPC) presented the work programmes of their respective committees ([6969/19](#) and [6356/19](#)).

OTHER ITEMS APPROVED

INSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

Appointment of the new Director-General of the Council legal service

Today, the Council appointed Ms Thérèse Blanchet as Director-General of the Council legal service. She will take up her new post on 1 July 2019.

For more information, see [press release](#).

TRANSPARENCY

Public access to documents

On 15 March 2019, the Council approved the reply to confirmatory application No 02/c/01/19 (doc. [6063/1/19 REV 1](#)).
