

On 10 May 2021, the AFCO Committee held an exchange of views with VP for Interinstitutional Relations Maroš Šefčovič.

After a comprehensive introductory presentation given by VP Šefčovič addressing many interinstitutional issues (right of initiative, right of inquiry, reform of the Ombudsman statute, CoFE etc.), the MEPs had the opportunity to express their opinions and concerns on those issues. They did so in an often quite critical manner, on interinstitutional relations as a whole, on the role and alleged lack of impartiality of the Commission - or its lack of support for the EP - as well as on specific files such as the right of inquiry. MEPs also had a number of questions on the next steps in the CoFE.

VP Šefčovič informed MEPs that the COM Work Programme 2022 would be ready very soon.

Concerning the EP's right of initiative (Article 225 TFEU), he stressed the good progress made: the COM had given a positive response for the 7 relevant EP resolutions.

Concerning the CoFE, he welcomed the adoption of the Rules of procedure and the inclusion of different actors in the Conference's bodies (EESC, CoR, etc.). He stressed the positive feedback and the growing interest of citizens with respect to the digital platform (25,000 daily visitors, over 400,000 page views and over 10,000 participants already registered). The most popular topics on the platform were currently European democracy, climate change and environment. He stressed the importance of listening but also of following-up on the proposals and recommendations. He would be pleased to include some of the proposals directly in the next COM work programme. In his opinion, transferring consultations to mainstream policy making would be a game changer for participatory democracy and for the public debate.

Concerning the Ombudsman file, he stressed the good progress and the hard work done on compromises. He mentioned his participation on the political meeting on this file taking place that day and hoped to reach a final agreement.

Concerning the EP's right of inquiry, the COM fully recognised the importance of this file without prejudice to the powers conferred by the Treaties to other institutions. The COM was ready to help unlock the discussions. He mentioned the PT PCY's intention to reply to the Parliament's letter and the oral questions tabled for the June plenary. He called on all stakeholders to unblock the file.

Concerning the implementation of the UK Withdrawal Agreement, and more precisely on citizens' rights and the Irish protocol, the COM approach was to put pressure where needed through both legal and political action. The COM was making efforts to cool down and depoliticise the situation, especially in Northern Ireland. He stressed that discussions on the file should remain technical in order to avoid political tension. In his opinion, this approach was delivering results, with both parties continuing to engage constructively on citizens' rights.

On behalf of the political groups:

- **Mr Bilcik (EPP, SK)** underlined that AFCO played a key role in strengthening the relationship between the EP and the COM. He thanked the COM for the constructive work on the Ombudsman file, but criticised it for sidelining the EP on important decisions such as the MFF, Recovery Fund and Rule of law issues.
- **Mr Ruiz Devesa (S&D, ES)** concurred with the previous speaker. The COM should be more specific in its commitment and support on the right of inquiry. With the adoption of the European Recovery Plan and large amounts of budgetary transfers, the EP's right of inquiry would become even more

important than ever. On the CoFE, he asked how the information provided by the stakeholders would be used and how the Executive Board intended to select the organisations representing civil society.

- **Mr Durand (Renew, FR)** criticised the COM for not being impartial during trilogues. He also asked about the one-in/one-out principle.
- **Ms Huhtasaari (ID, FI)** stressed the subsidiarity principle and the important role of national Parliaments, which should be increased. She also referred to a FI press article on the FI Parliament and the Recovery package. She also asked about the future of EU-UK relations.
- **Mr Freund (Greens, DE)** supported Mr Durand's intervention. He asked about how to improve the communication on CoFE as he found the numbers mentioned by VP Sefcovic regarding traffic on the platform underwhelming. He also enquired as to what would happen if citizens' proposals contradicted political willingness to act on issues such as the situation of the EP's seat in Strasbourg (noting the numerous proposals on the platform for a single seat). He expressed concerns about how to ensure that the citizens' panels would have a real impact.
- **Mr Scholz (The Left, DE)** stressed that some procedures took too long (e.g. the right of inquiry file), additional efforts were needed. He also asked about the follow-up of the proposals made in the CoFE framework.

VP Šefčovič disagreed with MEP Bilcik concerning the sidelining of the EP on the MFF. **On the Recovery plans, he stressed the amount of work required by the process and the role of the EP.** He made clear that the COM welcomed the EP to take part in the discussions concerning the RRF implementation every two months. The COM was committed to sending simultaneously to the Council and to the EP all the documents needed. Concerning the right of inquiry, he stressed that all institutions needed to make efforts in order to achieve a compromise and overcome the old red lines and praised the PT PCY for its efforts. He also asked the EP to cooperate with the incoming SI and FR presidencies and stressed the need to have the Council on board on this file.

In the **ensuing debate**, **Mr Simon (EPP, DE)** accused the COM of being the "secretariat of the Council" and of lacking ambition as regards the CoFE. He said many MEPs were disappointed by the current state of interinstitutional relations - there was a lot of rhetoric but little substance according to him. **Mr Gozi (Renew, FR)** asked the VP about the application of the "one in, one out" principle of Better Regulation. Concerning cooperation with Council Presidencies on the right of inquiry, **Ruiz Devesa (S&D, ES)** stressed that the EP had been asking to meet up with PCies every 6 months but the Council refused. The last one took place under the HR PCY. **LeBreton (ID, FR)** stressed that should the CoFE's outcome require a change of the Treaties, MS had to comply with the organisation of a referendum on the issue.

VP Maroš Šefčovič reassured that the "one in, one out" principle would not be applied mechanically; in 2023 there would be an assessment of the system. The COM received more than 6800 written questions in 2020, putting pressure to DGs in particular when dealing with crisis, but the COM made efforts to respect the deadlines. As regards the MEPs' impression of the COM not being neutral, he stressed that the Council has the same impression.