

S&D Interparliamentary Newsletter - Connecting with National Parliaments

BRUSSELS, 18/12/2024

S&D Interparliamentary Network Meeting

On 6 December, the S&D Interparliamentary Network convened for its sixth meeting.

At present, our network is composed of over 70 senior staff from 32 parliamentary chambers across 27 Member States and 4 non-EU countries (i.e. EEA- candidate countries). To date, the network consists of a broad range of political officials- former ministers, MEPs and MPs, parliamentary secretary-generals, heads of cabinet and cabinet members, senior EU advisors, communication directors and international secretaries.



The aim of this network is to strengthen connections within our political family in Europe and beyond, and to coordinate activity and outreach between our parliamentary sister groups. Established during the debates within the Conference on the Future of Europe, and developed over the last three years, today we are a wide-ranging and active network, which meets at least twice a year. Meetings of this network serve to facilitate political dialogue between our progressive groups and strengthen cooperation among the social democrat family. Our exchange of views is always guided by a pro-European, progressive viewpoint which calls for a more united and equal Europe based on solidarity and sustainability.

The EU's political state of play in the new mandate

During our network meeting, we reviewed and analysed the year's political developments at EU level. Since the European Parliament elections in June, the landscape of European politics has been significantly altered.

Now, there is a larger, more explicit ultra-conservative force seeking to influence the EU's legislative agenda in Brussels. Despite this concerning shift, the S&D Group remains the second largest by some margin, with 136 MEPs representing 25 national delegations. We also have prominent influence in the Parliament's legislative structure, reflected in five S&D Committee Chairs and five Parliament Bureau Vice-Presidents, including Vice-President for National Parliaments, MEP Katarina Barley.

Meanwhile, with a new European Commission now composed, our four social democrat leaders have gained key portfolios covering the green and digital transitions, youth and culture, people and skills, and a new housing and energy portfolio. The importance of these roles, particularly the introduction of a housing competence for the first time, demonstrates the skillful negotiating work carried out by our political family amid the Commission's re-structuring.

Finally, Portuguese Socialist leader, Antonio Costa has now taken over the Presidency of the European Council. A skilled negotiator known for his progressive credentials and cooperative approach, we congratulate Mr. Costa on his new role and we are confident in his ability to find consensus among European leaders during a volatile geopolitical and economic period for Europe.



2024 - A global election super-cycle

Besides the European Parliament elections, across the continent there were 14 legislative elections this year - a historic number. In the context of our network meeting, colleagues from sister parties provided extensive overviews on the elections in their respective countries.

We heard a great deal on the major issues and strategies seen during these campaigns. Despite local nuances and national contexts, certain themes were present across different countries - the hard-right's weaponisation of climate and migration issues, and the need for progressives to focus on core social justice issues in a period of reactionary culture wars.

Despite increasing polarisation and external attempts to influence European democratic processes, social democrats managed to make important gains in certain countries. In Ireland, the Labour Party doubled its seats with a dynamic election campaign focused on the delivery of social housing and improving transport and childcare services. Meanwhile in Lithuania, a strong communication campaign led by

popular leader and MEP, Vilija Blinkevičiūtė, primarily focused on combatting social exclusion in rural areas, resulting in a first place victory for the Social Democrats.



European Council Presidencies - a long-awaited transition

During the interparliamentary exchange on 6 December, we listened to a review of the Hungarian Council Presidency from the International Secretary of the Demokratikus Koalicio Party.

This analysis unpacked the very unusual and challenging six-month tenure when Hungary oversaw the European Council's agenda and meetings. Starting in highly provocative fashion, including "peace missions" or rogue diplomatic trips to Moscow and Beijing, Orban then went on to pursue a set of confused Presidency priorities, which largely entailed reforms surrounding competitiveness, agriculture and demographic challenges.

Despite the dramatic marketing and misinformation stemming from the authoritarian Fidesz government, the Hungarian Presidency has been largely unproductive and inconsequential, failing to address the major geopolitical and economic volatility in Europe in a meaningful way.

Meanwhile, our counterparts in the Polish Nowa Lewica reported their considerations ahead of the upcoming Polish Council Presidency, starting on January 1st. The Polish Government, of which the New Left is a coalition partner, has outlined a 7-pillared approach to their Presidency agenda centred on one fundamental priority - security.



Developing the "East Shield" security infrastructure, intensifying sanctions on Russia, and ensuring stability of Europe's transatlantic ties in an intense moment of political flux will form major part of Poland's foreign policy approach during its Presidency.

In the digital sphere meanwhile, Poland has stated its ambition to serve as a broker of cooperation, enhancing technical ties with Western partners to boost cybersecurity and offset industrial vulnerability.

Importantly, the areas of Digitalisation; Family, Employment and Social Affairs; Science and Higher Education; and Equality are governed by Ministers from the Polish New Left. Their promotion of the social dimension and human solidarity during this consequential and geopolitical Presidency, with a new European and US political landscape unfolding is essential for our political family's mission.

Progressives Unite for Rule of Law Meeting in the European Parliament



In the framework of the European Parliament's *Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs Committee*, an Interparliamentary Meeting on the Rule of Law Situation in the EU took place on 12 December in Brussels.

Bringing together national and European parliamentarians, this initiative provides a platform for policymakers to highlight some of the most urgent issues facing Europe concerning democratic standards and fundamental rights.

Ahead of this key institutional meeting, socialist and social democrat deputies came together to discuss priorities of the progressive family in this legislative area. With combined representation from ten Member States, national parliamentarians engaged with S&D Group LIBE Members on key topics such as LGBTQ+ rights, improving access to justice, and the right to peaceful assembly in a shrinking civil society sector.

Social Democrats prioritise human rights in the face of populist backlash

During this S&D political preparatory meeting, Members stressed the need to mobilise against the increasing civil rights backlash from conservative forces taking place in many Member States.

More specifically, the exchange heard key examples from Hungary, where the Orban Government has eroded judicial independence for years, impairing citizens' ability to access basic legal entitlements and remedies.

The plight of human trafficking was also referenced - an issue which S&Ds have led on in the EU. Victims of trafficking across Europe are often highly vulnerable and need greater supports from the relevant authorities. Recognising this, our Group paved the way for a stronger Anti-Trafficking Directive which entered into force this year and will be transposed into all Member States' national legislation by 2026.

The meeting heard that, in Lithuania, certain progress has been made in the LGBTQ+ rights landscape, particularly in the area of sexual-orientation based anti-discrimination measures. However, major challenges remain, specifically regarding a deeply regressive LGBTQ+ “anti-propaganda law”, which severely limits expressions of non-heterosexuality in public life.



On the right to assembly, expression and peaceful protest, countries with socialist leadership have led by example. In Spain, for instance, the PSOE has led a strong democratic regeneration since taking office, with robust measures implemented to protect freedom of expression and a courageous refusal to not work with hard-right leaders at European Council level. Similarly, Malta has been steadily improving its rule of law record under the Labour Government, prioritising consultation with citizens, NGOs and social partners.

This comes at a time when conservative governments across Europe are narrowing the space for civil society to express alternative viewpoints - this is seen in Italy for instance, where Meloni's hard-right Italian government has recently introduced a bill that aims to harshly crack down on climate activism and attack collective freedoms for protestors. For S&D parties, it is essential to combat such democratic backsliding through a strong rule of law agenda.

Agreed among colleagues at this meeting was the need for more regular interparliamentary dialogue on this topic. Undoubtedly, defending democratic principles, and protecting the legal and social rights of vulnerable minorities is an ongoing fight, and cooperation among progressive groups is central to this cause.

Whats's Next - Upcoming Interparliamentary Activities

- COSAC Chairpersons' meeting, Warsaw, Poland - **26 and 27 January 2025**
- European Parliamentary Week 2025, including the Inter-parliamentary Conference on (IPC) on Stability, Economic Coordination and Governance in the EU (SECG) - **17 and 18 February 2025**
- Interparliamentary Committee Meeting on EU foreign and security policy challenges, EP Brussels - **19 February 2025**
- The 16th meeting of the Joint Parliamentary Scrutiny Group on Europol (JPSG), Warsaw - **23 and 24 February 2025**

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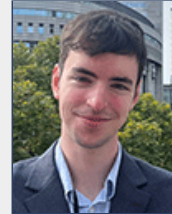
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The Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (the S&D Group) is the second largest political group in the European Parliament. We stand for an inclusive European society based on principles of solidarity, equality, diversity, freedom and fairness. We promote social justice, jobs and growth, consumer rights, sustainable development, financial market reforms and human rights to create a stronger and more democratic Europe and a better future for all citizens.

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