

# STRASBOURG DIARY

The latest updates from the team at FTI Consulting Brussels  
*Giving you insight to what is on the EU agenda*

April 2019

## It's a wrap: Notre Dame a fitting metaphor for Europe as Parliament heads towards elections

The European Parliament convened one last time in Strasbourg before the European elections to adopt the remainder of the 350 legislative proposals tabled by Juncker Commission over the last five years. FTI Consulting Brussels surveys the mood music on the closing stages of the current Presidency;

Last-minute packing, farewell drinks, and a whole lot of uncertainty as to the future composition of the Parliament defined the mood. It was a busy Plenary session overall, with financial services, new Digital Single Market, and of course Brexit dominating the scene.

It was crunch time for several critical financial services files: from the rules governing the banking sector and investment firms to the highly contested review of the powers of the EU regulators for banks, markets, and insurers. Likewise, on the digital front, MEPs voted on: the first-ever rules governing business-to-business relations within the online platform economy; preventing the dissemination of terrorist content online; adapting consumer rights to the digital age and updating technical standards for connected cars.

The months of negotiations preceding the votes might have been tough, but the votes themselves were somewhat scripted. Looking ahead, not without a sense of emergency, MEPs aligned with the European Commission on the need to intensify cybersecurity efforts and increase transparency to protect the integrity of EU elections. *"Elections belong to the people – we must make sure it stays that way"* stated the Prime Minister of Latvia, quoting Abraham Lincoln.

### Lost in transition

While most MEPs struck a self-congratulatory tone on a job well done in this term, they were much more sceptical as to what the future holds. In the busy corridors of the Parliament building, the chatter revealed the existence of two very distinct groups – those already in campaign mode, those looking for a new opportunity – and some just (happily) announcing their retirement. Populism and Brexit were the main worries for those running for re-election.

Speaking of which, the impact of the Brexit *'flectention'* has caused particular nervousness amongst the bigger party groups. Inclusion of the UK MEPs in the makeup of the new Parliament will have implications for the election not only in terms of the new members and Chairs of the Parliament Committees, but also because it might tilt the balance of power between the political groupings. If the UK does indeed hold elections, some MEPs wonder about the impact on the *Spitzenkandidat* process. Many are also bracing themselves for the expected newcomers with strong anti-EU sentiments and speculate about how this will impact the agenda and the speed of legislating in the new mandate.

### Are you capable of love?

Striking a completely different tone, President Juncker finished his last speech to the European Parliament on Wednesday with a call to all Europeans to love Europe: *"Europe has to be loved. If you don't love it, you are not capable of love"*. Only history will tell if Juncker's *"Long live Europe"* appeal will prevail. For now, Nigel Farage proudly proclaimed during a Brexit debate on Tuesday morning that

*"I am coming back"*, and so would a large number of other populists from across Europe.

All politics, however, was set aside after news reached Strasbourg that fire had engulfed Paris' Notre Dame Cathedral. The news broke while MEPs were debating the Banking package, a rather technical piece of legislation negotiated for over two years. In a split second, the tone in the room changed. Some MEPs pointed at the profanity of debating banking rules, while a symbol of our civilisation was burning. French MEPs were unable to hold back their tears while colleagues from across the aisle consoled them.

## A time to rebuild

The devastation of the Cathedral, and the outpouring of support which followed, provide a fitting metaphor for the current state of EU affairs; links created by history cannot be broken even in the face of fraction and division. As the Prime Minister of Latvia Krišjānis Kariņš pointed out in his speech on the future of Europe, the EU is not perfect, but we share common values of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law which bring us together. We will only be able to promote these around the world if Europe sticks together. His strong pro-European message included a call not to engage with the populists, but rather to try and understand the reasons for citizens' disillusionment with politics.

The concluding mood was one of reflection. Much like Notre Dame, Europe itself may need to be rebuilt. It's unlikely that business will continue in quite the same way when Parliament next convenes.



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