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‘Protect, Strengthen, Prepare’ – Belgium’s Presidency of the Council of the EU

January 1 - June 30, 2024



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Introduction

Billions of citizens will go to the polls across the globe in 2024, a year which could further destabilise an already fractured geopolitical order. Ahead of Europe's June elections, Belgium takes the helm of the Presidency of the Council of the EU from January 1 – June 30, under a motto reflecting the scale of the challenge ahead: 'Protect, Strengthen, Prepare'. Belgium also faces Federal and Regional elections of its own on June 9.

According to its [Work Programme](#), the Belgian Presidency's focus therefore will be concluding priority legislation in time to be added to the European Parliament's final plenary in April, as well as setting the tone and priorities for the 2024-2029 political mandate.

During a kick-off event on December 8 last year, Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo (RE) and Foreign Affairs Minister Hadja Lahbib (RE) announced the priorities of the Belgian Presidency. Its programme revolves around six central themes:

1. Defending rule of law, democracy, and unity;
2. Strengthening our competitiveness;
3. Pursuing a green and just transition;
4. Reinforcing our social and health agenda;
5. Protecting people and borders; and
6. Promoting a global Europe.

Under its Presidency, Belgium will also support the adoption of the Strategic Agenda 2024-2029, which will set out the Council's priorities for the next political mandate. Moreover, it will prepare discussions on questions fundamental to the EU's future, such as the reform of its institutions and decision-making processes, including to facilitate the bloc's potential enlargement.

Belgian Government and Council Configurations

Belgium has a complex political framework owing to its distinct regions and their respective languages. Prime Minister Alexander De Croo leads Belgium’s current Federal Government, together with 14 ministers, also referred to as the “Vivaldi Coalition”.



This coalition is composed of Mr. De Croo’s Open VLD (Liberals), and other Flemish (Dutch-speaking) parties – Vooruit (Socialists), Groen (Greens), and CD&V (Christian-Democrats) – together with Walloon (French-speaking) parties MR (Liberals), PS (Socialists), and Ecolo (Greens). Moreover, Belgium’s Flemish, Walloon, and Brussels-Capital regions have their own Regional Parliaments. In addition, Belgium also has a French and a German-speaking Community, which both have their own Parliaments.

To reflect this diversity, Belgium has set up a rotation system to determine which Federal Government or regional/community competences align with formal Presidency roles, including Working Party Chairs and Spokespeople.

In this system, a Federal, Regional or Community Minister sitting within a Council configuration will always represent Belgium and express the agreed Belgian position. An Assessor-Minister can assist the Minister on topics within the competence of their governmental-level.

For example, Council configurations such as Foreign Affairs, Economic and Financial Affairs, Justice and Home Affairs, and Consumer Affairs have an exclusive Federal representation. Internal Market, Public Health, Social Affairs, Energy, and Transport have a Federal representation with an Assessor-Minister from the regions. Industry, Research, and Environment have representation from Regional or Community-level, with assistance provided by a Federal Assessor-Minister.

Considering that Education, Youth, Sport, Culture/Audio-Visual, Spatial Planning, Housing, Cohesion, and Tourism are exclusive competences of the regions, representation in the Council will be exclusively on the Regional and Community-levels. For Fisheries, Belgium is always represented by Flanders, and for Agriculture, the Federal Minister is always assisted by the Ministers of the Walloon or Flemish Regions.



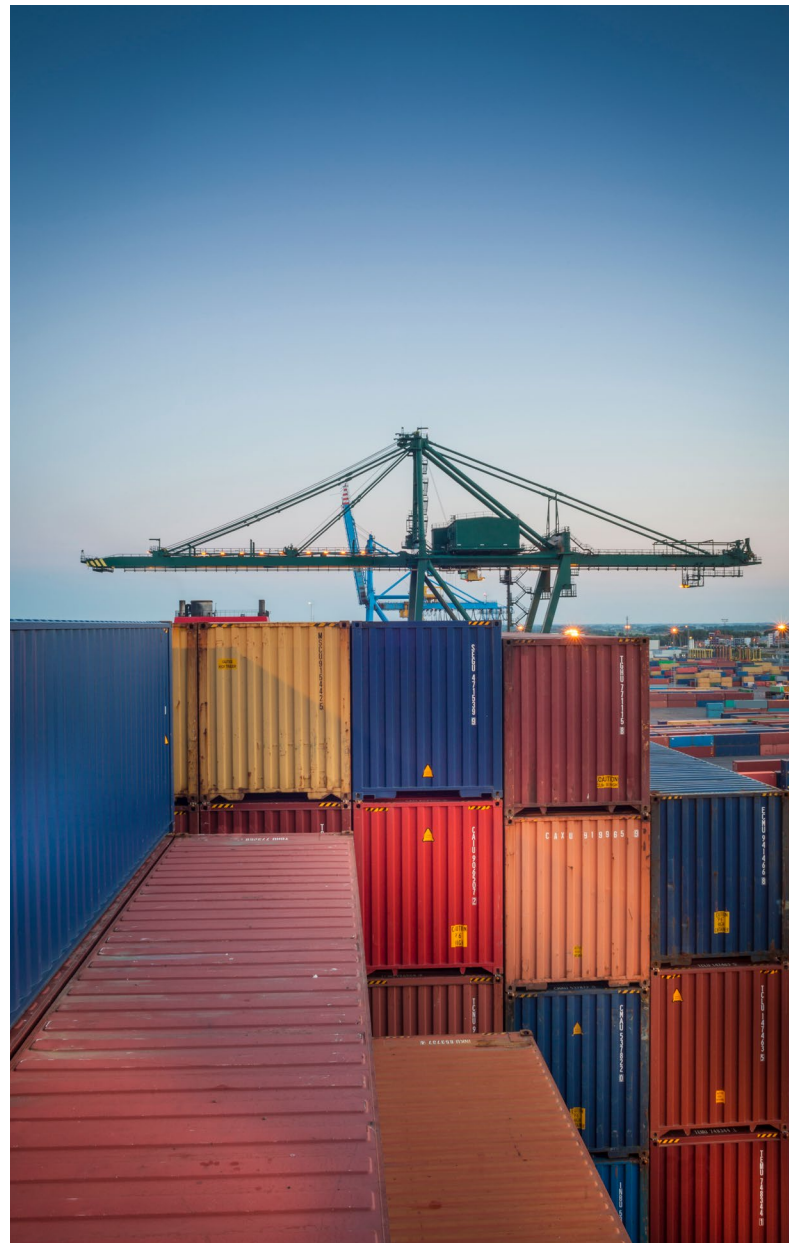
Competition & Industrial Policy

*As the EU prepares for the adoption of a new **Strategic Agenda** to set its political priorities for the next five years (2024-2029), it finds itself at a crucial juncture in positioning itself on the global stage. The role of the Belgian Presidency is therefore imperative in shaping the bloc's direction as it works towards concluding key legislative files by April 2024.*

Cognizant of these aims, one of the key thematic areas the Belgian Presidency will focus on is '**strengthening the EU's competitiveness**'. In its Work Programme, Belgium has committed to continue steering the EU on its way through the **twin transition**, while working towards enhancing its **economic security, mitigating dependencies** and striving for **technological leadership** in pivotal sectors.

To proactively prepare a toolbox to counter crises within the Single Market, the Belgian Presidency will seek to conclude interinstitutional negotiations and reach a final agreement on the **Single Market Emergency Instrument (SMEI)**. It is also expected to continue the work of the Spanish Presidency and present, by March 2024, **a high-level report on the future of the Single Market** to take stock of lessons learned and determine concrete ambitions - as requested by the European Council in June 2023.

Belgium is also dedicated to enhancing Europe's **industrial policy**. In pursuit of this, it will assess the efficacy of instruments like Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEI), cluster collaboration, the InvestEU Programme, and the European Innovation Council (EIC). It also aims to gauge how these elements, and the potential broadening of its



toolbox, can **promote inclusivity for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)**.

In line with the aim of moving towards open strategic autonomy and accelerating the twin transition, the Belgian Presidency plans to prioritize securing access to **critical raw materials** and innovative technologies, advance the **Green Deal Industrial Plan for the Net-Zero Age (GDIP)**, and aims to finalize the **Net-Zero Industry Act (NZIA)** to reduce strategic dependencies. It will also concentrate on completing work on the **Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR)** (on which a provisional agreement was reached on December 5) and exploring opportunities in the bioeconomy, circular manufacturing, and technologies like hydrogen and carbon capture.

Additionally, the Belgian Presidency will continue shaping an **intellectual property (IP) system** that ensures access to critical technologies, also aiming to conclude any outstanding work on the related legal protection of industrial designs.

Regarding trade, it plans to pursue an ambitious and **well-balanced trade policy** that recognizes the importance of a strengthened **rules-based multilateral trading system**. To further the aim of enhancing the Union's resilience, competitiveness, and addressing trade barriers, the Belgian Presidency will advocate for the **diversification of EU exports and supply chains**, with a particular focus on securing access to critical raw materials and innovative technologies.

To strengthen global connections, the Belgian Presidency will actively promote an ambitious bilateral trade agenda with special attention given to fostering relations with **transatlantic partners**, the **Indo-Pacific region, Africa, and Latin America**. Meanwhile, towards **China**, the Belgian Presidency plans to formulate a

coherent policy involving enduring engagement, **collaboration on shared challenges**, and minimizing strategic dependencies.

Finally, Belgium plans to monitor and advance legislative files related to **trade instruments**, including the **screening of foreign direct investments (FDI)** and the comprehensive implementation of the **Economic Security Strategy**.

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Energy & Sustainability

With most Green Deal policies now in implementation phase, the Belgian Presidency will focus on concluding as many outstanding legislative files as possible before the EU elections. Belgian Minister Alain Maron, who will lead the work on sustainability issues for the Presidency, has already tempered expectations by stating "it's not certain that we'll be able to achieve them all", adding that this will depend on the willingness of all institutional parties.

In addition to concluding ongoing files, Belgium has expressed its commitment to ensure that the next European Commission carries forward green policies after the EU elections. Mr. Maron positioned himself against recent calls for pausing the Green Deal, saying that environmental and climate issues should be **"at the centre of the European agenda"**.

To this aim, the Belgian Presidency will work on adopting Council conclusions detailing sustainability priorities for the next term. These should focus on ensuring a fair green transition, delivering affordable energy to citizens and companies, ensuring strong and reliable security of supply, and contributing to climate neutrality.

On energy policy, the Belgian Presidency will prioritise the conclusion of two files of crucial importance for reaching climate neutrality by 2050: i) the **review of CO2 emission standards for heavy-duty vehicles**, which intends to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the mobility sector; and ii) the **proposal for a union certification framework for carbon removals**, which encourages the development of these technologies.

It will also continue the work on the **revision of the energy performance of buildings**



directive and the regulation on methane emissions reduction in the energy sector.

The Belgian Presidency also wishes to lay the groundwork for the future EU energy agenda and will focus on **advancing sustainable energy infrastructures** by assessing the current European framework’s effectiveness in planning, building, and financing. It will also work towards leveraging the EU’s energy-efficiency potential across its entire economy, and supporting the development of renewable and low-carbon energy sources and carriers.

On broader sustainability issues, Belgium will focus on concluding interinstitutional negotiations on the **Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation**, which, according to Mr. Maron, is “undoubtedly the most politically complicated issue” on the Presidency’s plate.

The list of files Belgium hopes to finalize during its Presidency also includes the **revision of EU wastewater treatment rules**, a **proposal to restrict the use of mercury**, and the **revision of EU air quality guidelines**. Belgium will also work to foster an agreement between Member States on several files which will likely not be concluded before the June 2024 European elections, such as the **Green Claims directive**, the **soil monitoring law**, and the revision of the **Waste Framework directive**. Finally, it will pursue the implementation of the **chemicals strategy for sustainability** with a focus on microplastics and per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS).

Moreover, the Belgian Presidency will aim to secure a final deal on the **Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence directive**, and move forward in delivering on the regulation on prohibiting products manufactured with **forced labour**.

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Technology, Media & Telecommunications

*This political mandate has seen the adoption of many major legislative initiatives in the tech space, with the previous Spanish Presidency finding **provisional political agreements** on remaining files such as the **AI Act** and **Cyber Resilience Act**. The Belgian Presidency will finalise remaining work on these dossiers, with some Member States sceptical about the AI Act's approach to foundation models, while it continues to progress on priority files and respond to policy developments promoting **open strategic autonomy**.*

The Belgian Presidency will also seek to finalise negotiations on remaining files such as the **amendment of the Cybersecurity Act** to provide for certification schemes for **managed security services**, and the related **Cyber Solidarity Act**. It will also conduct a **review of EU cyber policy** to assess gaps which may need to be addressed during the next legislature.

Addressing the diverse **challenges in telecommunications** is also highlighted as a priority. This means not only finalising negotiations on the **Gigabit Infrastructure Act**, but also navigating Member State reactions to the soon-expected European Commission **white paper** on the future of the sector, which may form the basis of a **Digital Networks Act** later this year.

The Work Programme also refers to **reflecting and discussing how to shape networks which foster innovation**. Prime Minister De Croo, a well-known tech advocate, pushed for additional telecoms market entrants in the past, while the Belgian regulator denied the existence of an investment gap last year.



As an honest and neutral broker, the Belgian Presidency may be tasked with navigating a controversial discussion on future of the Single Market, including the European telecoms sector, potentially on the agenda of the European Council on March 21-22.

Another challenge will be finding a Council position on the **Regulation combatting child sexual abuse material online (CSAM)** by one of the upcoming Justice and Home Affairs Councils. Several Member States have been strongly opposed to any measures which could jeopardise end-to-end encrypted communications. With time to finalise the file during this mandate practically elapsed, the European Commission pre-emptively published a proposal to extend the temporary derogation allowing for the voluntary scanning of messages for CSAM.

Finally, Belgium's Deputy Prime Minister and Telecoms Minister Petra De Sutter (Green) expressed her desire for the digital transition to be both green and social. **Green tech issues** such as the sustainability of data centres and telecom infrastructure, as well as their roles in reaching green deal targets, will be discussed as part of the Presidency event 'Tomorrow's Tech Today', taking place on Feb 7-8. The outcome of the event should feed into the conclusions of the May 21 Telecoms Council, which may also shape the expected Digital Networks Act.

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Annex I

Highlights from the Belgian Presidency's Calendar

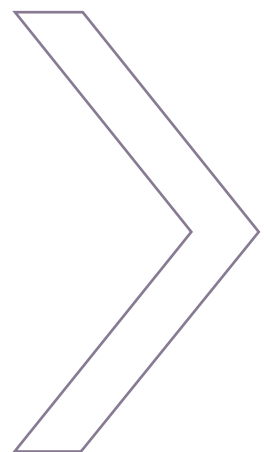
The full [calendar](#) of official meetings and cultural events can be found on the Belgian Presidency's [official website](#).

Other updates can also be found on the Belgian Presidency's [official X channel](#).

Jan 15 - 16	Informal meeting of Environment Ministers
Jan 23	Agriculture Council
Jan 24 - 26	Informal meeting of Justice and Home Affairs Ministers
Jan 29	General Affairs Council
Feb 1	Special European Council
Feb 8 - 9	Informal meeting of Competitiveness Ministers (Internal Market and Industry)
Feb 20	General Affairs Council
Feb 26	Agriculture Council
Mar 4	Energy Council
Mar 4 - 5	Justice and Home Affairs Council
Mar 7	Competitiveness Council (Internal Market and Industry)
Mar 19	General Affairs Council
Mar 21 - 22	European Council
Mar 25	Environmental Council
Mar 26	Agriculture Council
Apr 11 - 12	Informal meeting of Telecoms Ministers
Apr 15 - 16	Informal meeting of Energy Ministers
Apr 17 - 18	Informal European Council
Apr 29	Agriculture Council
Apr 29 - 30	Informal General Affairs Council
May 21	General Affairs Council

May 21	<u>Telecoms Council</u>
May 24	<u>Competitiveness Council (Internal Market and Industry)</u>
May 27	<u>Agriculture Council</u>
May 30	<u>Energy Council</u>
Jun 13 - 14	<u>Justice and Home Affairs Council</u>
Jun 17	<u>Environment Council</u>
Jun 17	<u>Informal European Council</u>
Jun 27 - 28	<u>European Council</u>

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