

Hadja Lahbib

Preparedness and Crisis Management; Equality

Confirmation hearing due to be held on Wednesday 6 November, at 9.00.

European Parliament committees responsible: Development (DEVE), Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM), Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE), Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI)

Hadja Lahbib a member of the Mouvement réformateur (MR) party, which sits with the Renew Europe group in the European Parliament, has been serving as Belgian minister for foreign affairs, European affairs and foreign trade, and federal cultural institutions since 2022.

She was elected as a member of the Parliament of the Brussels Capital Region in 2024 but is currently on leave to fulfil her ministerial duties.

Before joining the Belgian government, she co-led the Brussels bid for the title of European Capital of Culture 2030.

Born in Belgium in 1970 to a family of Algerian Kabyle origin, Lahbib obtained a master's degree in journalism and communication from the Université Libre de Bruxelles. She then worked as a journalist and presenter for Belgium's French-speaking public broadcasting company and other broadcasters, where she gained international experience in covering conflict zones, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. She produced several documentaries to highlight injustices, especially those against women in Afghanistan, Kenya and Belgium.



Hadja Lahbib, Belgium.

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This is one of a set of briefings designed to give an overview of issues of interest relating to the portfolios of the Commissioners-designate. All these briefings can be found at: https://epthinktank.eu/commissioner_hearings_2024.



Fundamentals of the portfolio

Preparedness and crisis management. Climate change has increased the frequency and severity of [natural disasters](#) in the EU. The European Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) [assesses disaster risks](#) and coordinates **preparedness** actions for natural and human-caused disasters. While EU Member States carry the primary responsibility for civil protection, all of them – plus Iceland, Norway and most candidate countries – contribute to the Union Civil Protection Mechanism ([UCPM](#)). This mechanism has significantly enhanced disaster-response capabilities and strengthened cooperation to assist disaster-stricken countries [within and beyond](#) the EU (such as Ukraine). The [Emergency Response Coordination Centre](#) (ERCC) within ECHO serves as the UCPM operational hub that monitors emergencies in the EU and around the globe. The [European Civil Protection Pool](#) (ECP) brings together resources for the UCPM from Member States and other participating states.

Humanitarian crises are driven mainly by conflict (in 2023, [Sudan](#) alone accounted for almost 40 % of [global need](#), while the number of civilians killed in the Occupied Palestinian Territories at the end of 2023 was equivalent to 60 % of the global civilian death toll for 2022), climate emergency and economic factors. Most of these crises are long-standing and entail massive displacement, acute [food insecurity](#) and grave disease outbreaks. The number of people worldwide needing humanitarian aid rose to nearly [300 million in 2023](#), and more than a third of them [cannot be helped](#) because of a [funding gap](#). Violations of [international humanitarian law](#) have become more frequent, including [attacks](#) against aid workers. EU and Member States' humanitarian aid is [founded](#) on the international [humanitarian principles](#) of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. [ECHO](#) has a network in 40 non-EU countries but does not intervene directly on the ground; it funds projects run by around [200 partners](#). EU humanitarian assistance has an €11.6 billion [budget](#) for the 2021–2027 period. In addition, the Solidarity and Emergency Aid [Reserve](#) allocates up to €1.2 billion per year for responding to natural disasters and health crises. Together with its Member States, the EU is the [largest humanitarian aid donor](#) in the world (providing [over a third](#) of global humanitarian assistance); the European Commission alone provides 11.1 % of global humanitarian funding.

Equality is one of the EU's fundamental values. The EU Treaties allow the EU to adopt non-discrimination laws for specific protected grounds (racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age, sex and sexual orientation). EU legislation also protects victims of crime and qualifies serious manifestations of racism and xenophobia as criminal offences. To enhance equality and non-discrimination in the Member States, the EU also uses recommendations, funding and exchanges of good practice. Moreover, the Treaties require the EU to mainstream equality and non-discrimination in all its policies. To monitor progress, the EU has established the [European Fundamental Rights Agency](#) (FRA) and the [European Institute for Gender Equality](#) (EIGE). EIGE's [gender equality index](#) and FRA's surveys reveal the extent of discrimination and inequality across the EU.

Priorities and challenges

Expectations/public opinion

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, 9 out of 10 respondents to a Eurobarometer survey conducted in 2023 wanted to see a stronger EU role in [crisis management](#). The same proportion of respondents believed that funding EU [humanitarian aid](#) was important and either approved of the current level of spending or wished to see it increased. Seven out of 10 found agreed aid was more efficient when coordinated at the EU level. Participating in another 2023 survey, most respondents considered [discrimination](#) to still be widespread in their country, particularly on grounds such as Roma origin (65 %), skin colour (61 %), ethnic origin (60 %), gender identity (being transgender (57 %)) or sexual orientation (54 %). Some 38 % believed discrimination based on sex to be widespread (up 3 % since 2019). Around 20 % had personally experienced discrimination or been harassed because of their age, gender, political opinions, socio-economic situation or appearance.

Preparedness and crisis management. Hadja Lahbib will be responsible for strengthening EU [civil preparedness for and resilience](#) to a range of [increasing risks](#), from climate hazard to [military threat](#). The UCPM has shown its ability to adapt to unexpected events, but large-scale crises require better [cross-sectoral](#) coordination and awareness, including defence and health aspects. However, ECHO and national authorities are facing resource constraints and a significant workload. At global level, Lahbib will have to harness the EU's humanitarian response. More specifically, this will involve addressing the [funding gap](#), including by [leveraging private funding](#). The funding gap risks further aggravating some crises, which, despite being long-standing and complex, have been [forgotten](#) by the media and donors. To address these challenges, Lahbib will have to work towards [integrating](#) humanitarian interventions with longer-term development, peace, disaster-risk reduction and climate programmes. Increasing the number of global contributors and finding [common ground](#) with other (potential) donors will also be a crucial part of her work.

Equality. According to the 2024 [FRA report](#), discrimination is a pervasive issue disproportionately affecting people of [African descent](#) and [Roma](#), and incidents of racism and related forms of intolerance are rising. EIGE's Gender Equality Index indicates that gender gaps exist in most areas of life. Transposing directives adopted during the Commission's last term into national law should help here. However, there is a significant gap in legal protection against discrimination in the EU, as the proposal for a horizontal [anti-discrimination directive](#) (outside employment and on protected grounds other than race), initiated in 2008, remains blocked in the Council.

European Parliament

Treaty basis and European Parliament (EP) competence

[Article 196](#) TFEU is the legal basis for civil protection; the EU supports Member States' actions ([Article 6](#)) and the 'solidarity clause' applies ([Article 222](#)). [Article 214](#) is the legal basis for humanitarian aid. Parliament and the Council co-decide on measures aimed at achieving humanitarian and civil protection goals, although Member States can adopt their own legal provisions in these areas. Parliament oversees the Commission's implementing measures. The Committees on Development (DEVE) and on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) have responsibilities for humanitarian aid and civil protection, respectively. The ordinary legislative procedure is used for anti-discrimination measures on grounds of sex in employment ([Article 157](#)), while for grounds other than sex, Parliament must consent to a unanimous decision by the Council ([Article 19](#)).

Preparedness and crisis management. Parliament [has called for](#) the establishment of a permanent EU civil protection force and an EU centre of excellence in civil protection. It has highlighted the importance of ensuring adequate EU firefighting capabilities for forest fires in the EU. Since the EU-level [firefighting fleet](#) will not be fully operational by the end of 2024, Parliament has agreed that the EU should continue financing the leased aircraft to assist Member States in combating wildfires until 2027. Parliament has also [called](#) for increased predictable and flexible funding for humanitarian aid, for the inclusion of IHL violations as a criterion for sanctions, and for a clear humanitarian-development-peace nexus policy. Additionally, it has [urged](#) the sharing of knowledge with local stakeholders, and the establishment of an EU centre for humanitarian research.

Equality: Parliament played a key role in recent legislative initiatives on gender equality. In many resolutions, it has called for better integration of gender equality in policy areas such as [transport](#), environment, [digital](#), and budget, with a focus on women in vulnerable situations. Parliament has urged better consideration of [intersectional discrimination](#) in both legislative and non-legislative measures. It has [called](#) for the adoption of a new 2025-2030 LGBTIQ+ equality strategy and an implementation plan to include consultation with LGBTIQ+ organisations. Parliament has also called for action to [combat cyber-violence against women](#) and criminalise the [demand](#) for prostitution. It has called for [sexual and reproductive rights](#) to be upheld throughout the EU. As hate crimes based on religion are often under-reported and not prosecuted, Parliament has called for the establishment of comprehensive data collection systems on [hate crimes](#) and other discriminatory acts against belief- or religious communities. Parliament has also asked for [hate speech and crimes](#) to be considered EU crimes, as this would allow the Commission to propose directives on the matter.

Recent developments

Preparedness and crisis management. In April 2020, responding to the pandemic, the EU activated the [Emergency Support Instrument \(ESI\)](#), complemented by a dedicated reserve of **response capacities** at EU level ([rescEU](#)). Building on experience from the pandemic, in May 2021 the Council and Parliament [strengthened the UCPM](#) to enable the Commission to procure rescEU capacities directly. RescEU has since been [extended](#) until the end of 2027. In 2021, the Commission [advocated](#) prioritising local humanitarian responders, simplifying needs assessment and implementing flexible funding arrangements, including [digital cash transfers](#). It proposed strengthening coordination with [others](#), such as the military, and highlighted climate change, health, food security and disaster preparedness as [priorities](#). It emphasised the need to address the rise in violations of international humanitarian law globally. Since 2021, a [Response Capacity](#) has helped Member States and others coordinate their humanitarian response, and since 2022, [young volunteers](#) can join humanitarian aid operations in non-EU countries. An annual [European humanitarian forum](#) started in 2022.

Equality. Several important laws have been adopted and comprehensive strategies to fight discrimination proposed recently. Two new directives aim to empower women economically. The first, the 2022 [Women on Boards Directive](#), addresses the under-representation of women at the highest level of economic decision-making. The second, the 2023 [Equal Pay Directive](#), requires companies to share information on salaries and compensate victims of pay discrimination. To do more against **gender-based violence**, the EU [ratified](#) the Istanbul Convention in 2023 and adopted a [directive](#) in May 2024 setting minimum EU-level standards for several gender-based crimes and cybercrimes, and enhancing access to justice, protection of victims and prevention measures. Another two [new directives](#) adopted in May 2024 propose EU standards to strengthen the role of national equality bodies. In 2020, to protect **LGBTIQ+ people's** rights, the Commission tabled the [2020-2025 LGBTIQ equality strategy](#) – the first comprehensive EU strategy in this area. The Court of Justice ruled on several cases concerning [LGBTIQ+ rights](#) during previous terms. Other cases are pending, including an [infringement case](#) against [Hungary concerning a propaganda law](#).

The EU has enhanced the fundamental rights of the **most vulnerable groups**, in particular persons with disabilities, and children. A draft [directive](#) establishing an EU-wide disability card and improving the existing European parking card seeks to enhance recognition of disability status and facilitate the free movement of persons with disabilities. In September 2020, the Commission adopted the EU **anti-racism action plan 2020-2025**, and in 2021 appointed its first Anti-Racism Coordinator. An evaluation of the [Racial Equality Directive](#) found that there is significant under-reporting and that data collection on discrimination cases still needs improvement.

FURTHER READING

European Parliament, [Hadja Lahbib hearing documents and CV](#), 2024.

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eprs@ep.europa.eu (contact)

www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu (intranet)

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