

How Parliament's scrutiny of commissioners-designate has evolved

Confirmation hearings of potential EU commissioners are a key moment for Parliament. They have changed a lot over the years and have had a big impact.



Parliament's hearing with the Dutch commissioner-designate Wopke Hoekstra in 2023

What are confirmation hearings?

The confirmation hearings are part of the checks and balances at the EU level to ensure transparency and accountability. The candidates for EU commissioners are nominated by the governments of the EU countries, but then they are carefully vetted by the European Parliament before they are confirmed in their roles.

Before the commissioners-designate can even attend their hearings, Parliament's legal affairs

committee examines each candidate's financial situation to make sure there will be no conflict of interest. Only when the committee has given its green light can the hearing take place.

During the confirmation hearings, MEPs aim to assess whether commissioners-designate would be qualified to join the European Commission. After the hearings are over, Parliament holds a plenary vote to approve or reject the Commission as a whole.

Further information

[Read more about the confirmation hearings](#)

How did the confirmation hearings start?

Initially, the European Parliament was not involved in the appointment of the Commission as the decision was in the hands of the governments of EU countries.

The tradition was for each Commission President to deliver a general policy statement before Parliament when taking office.

Things changed with the Maastricht Treaty, which came into force in 1993. Having pushed for years for the right to have a say on the appointment of the EU executive, the European Parliament gained the right to vote on the Commission as a whole.

The [first formal hearings took place in January 1995](#) and resulted in a vote of approval for the Commission of Jacques Santer.

The subsequent Treaty of Amsterdam, enacted in 1999, gave Parliament the authority to approve the President of the Commission.

The Lisbon Treaty that came in force in 2009 clarified the criteria to be used when selecting the members of the Commission. The commissioners have to show general competence and independence, but also European commitment.

Increasing scrutiny

Already in the first hearings, parliamentary committees that were asked to evaluate candidates [made critical comments](#) if potential commissioners showed a lack of specialist knowledge in their designated portfolio or were reluctant to make policy commitments.

This led in subsequent hearings to commissioners-designate preparing more thoroughly on the concrete policy fields and presenting their plans in more detail.

This trend reflected the evolving role of the Parliament, which increasingly saw its role as ensuring that nominees were held to high standards.

Nowadays, Parliament makes a note of commissioners' commitments and [keeps track of progress](#) made throughout the Commission's term of office to check if commissioners really

deliver on what they have promised.

Parliament can also hold a so-called [special scrutiny hearing](#) in order to question one or more commissioners on major political issues.

Impact of hearings on the Commission's composition

Over the years, Parliament has demonstrated that it is ready to request the reshuffling of portfolios or the replacement of candidates that have potential conflicts of interest or fail to convince MEPs during the hearings.

Already in 2004, José Manuel Barroso replaced two commissioners - Rocco Buttiglione from Italy, who was put forward as a commissioner for justice, freedom and security; and Ingrīda Ūdre from Latvia, who was nominated as taxation commissioner - in order to secure Parliament's approval for his Commission. Barroso also changed the portfolio of László Kovács from Hungary from energy to taxation.

Rumiana Jeleva - who was Bulgaria's nominee for commissioner for international cooperation, humanitarian aid and crisis response - had to withdraw in January 2010 after her hearing in Parliament.

In 2014, Slovenian nominee Alenka Bratušek did not receive support as Commission vice-president for the energy union, which led to the reshuffling of portfolios. After criticism by MEPs, the portfolio of Hungarian nominee Tibor Navracsics was changed and he was not put in charge of citizenship, but made responsible for education, culture, youth and sport.

In the hearings process in 2019, Parliament's legal affairs committee [raised concerns about potential conflicts of interest](#) after having examined the declarations of financial interests of László Trócsányi, Hungary's nominee for the position of justice commissioner, and Rovana Plumb, Romania's nominee for transport commissioner.

A few days later, Sylvie Goulard, the French commissioner-designate for the internal market, failed to get the support of MEPs from the internal market and industry, research and energy committees. All three candidates - Trócsányi, Plumb and Goulard - were replaced before [Parliament gave its approval for the Commission led by Ursula von der Leyen](#).

Briefing

[Confirmation hearings of the commissioners-designate](#)