

European Parliament President Roberta Metsola remarks at the Extraordinary European Council of 30 and 31 May 2022, Brussels

Dear colleagues,

What we have achieved so far is already unprecedented, we have kept together and responded with unity, in a way that has surprised even the worst cynics.

So far, public opinion has been with us. Our people have opened their homes and their hearts to 6 million Ukrainians. They have largely accepted that there is a price to pay for the war and they have demanded a strong response.

My concern now is what happens when this inevitably shifts. When the so-called “CNN effect” of the war, coupled with Russian disinformation and misinformation puts us all under increased pressure or when prices remain high.

We must remain steadfast and start planning our long-term engagement in the region beyond the immediacy of emergency help to Ukraine. Europe must lead and must remain in the lead.

You are well aware of the Parliament’s position regarding Ukraine’s application for EU membership. Candidate status will give Ukraine hope. It will open doors to Ukraine to participate in different programmes and give them space and time for reforms to take place. This is not an overnight solution nor should we give the impression that it is. Candidate status - a real perspective - has the ability to transform countries - we’ve seen it with many around this table. And we’ve seen it in Albania and North Macedonia - to whom, by the way, we owe real answers.

What Ukraine needs right now is hope and perspective, or we will force Kyiv to look elsewhere.

We are at a point in time when the EU must become a real global power for democracy - flying the flag of liberal democracies in a world that is becoming more complicated and more dangerous.

No-one is saying it will be easy, or even straightforward, but it is worth it.

On sanctions, the Commission has been bold - rightly so -, and we need to move further. I really hope there is an agreement today, we cannot afford there not to be. Our aim needs to remain to disentangle ourselves from Russian energy. We should not be the ones to blink, but there is a limit to how much flexibility we can allow without losing credibility vis-à-vis our populations and look weak in the face of a Russia that, we know, shows no respect for weakness.

And friends, Lukashenko and Putin are two sides of the same coin. Sanctions on Russia must go hand in hand with sanctions on Belarus. We should not move on this. Those who have given up everything for a democratic Belarus and who look to us for support are looking to us again now.

The pressure that Russia’s invasion has caused on global food supply chains is extremely worrying. It goes beyond Europe. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the world will face real famine. If Ukraine is not allowed to toil its fields, we are looking at a global multi-year lack of food supplies.

Russia knows this and is blackmailing the world while filling up its own silos with stolen Ukrainian wheat and cereals. We urgently need to find ways to get grain moving out of Ukraine to where it is most needed in the world. We must increase the “solidarity lanes” as announced by the European Commission and explore other possibilities to get grain on the move.

The war in Ukraine has sped up the inevitable. We need to be able to ensure our energy independence. The *RePowerEU* communication is important and will help to rapidly reduce the Union's dependency on Russian gas, oil and coal imports and it will fast-forward the green transition.

The overarching goal of energy autonomy, for me, is an overriding factor.

Achieving our Green Deal objectives is the best way to wean ourselves off toxic dependencies from unreliable partners.

As regards to the gas and electricity markets, we should act swiftly in both sectors with a common goal to protect European households from severe price fluctuations. We should work on developing common mechanisms and purchasing platforms on gas and optimise our electricity market so that they fend off future price volatility. The swift conclusion of negotiations on the gas storage requirement shows we can deliver - but we need more.

Our investments on energy and in the green transition must be seen as much as a security issue as it is an environmental one - which is also why the Fit for 55 package is so essential.

Our security and defence is fast becoming an existential question. We need to have the tools to defend ourselves and we can only do that together. The bottom line is that we need to work on cooperation, inter-operability and pool our resources more efficiently.

We need to respond and we can do so in a manner that complements rather than competes with NATO.

This will have budgetary implications. There will be a necessity to increase our defence budgets and we need to see how better to re-direct common funds towards enhancing our defence capabilities.

Finally one last word on economic flexibility. Allowing the general escape clause of our fiscal rules until the end of 2023 can be helpful in the immediate term, with a post-covid scenario, a war at our doorstep and our ongoing energy transition. At the same time, we must not allow excessive debt to limit the potential of the generations to come. That balance and responsibility is one we must take seriously.

Europe needs our leadership. The way we react in the next months will define our common future. The European Parliament is ready to constructively play its part.

Thank you.