

President Metsola's intervention at the European Council
Thursday 26th October 2023

Thank you, Charles.

Good afternoon everyone.

The terror attack in Israel, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the tensions in the wider Middle East continue to be of grave concern. Hamas' terror attacks have cast a dark shadow over the entire region. I witnessed it first-hand when I visited the sites of the atrocities and met with grieving survivors. I know many of you have been there too.

There can be no excuses - no justification - for the deliberate mass rape, kidnapping, torture and murder of entire communities, of children, of women and men - of young people at a party. This was a terrorist attack by a terrorist organisation, that feeds off hate. It is important to acknowledge that.

Just as it is important to understand that Hamas do not represent the legitimate aims of the Palestinian people. They hinder them.

The European Parliament has condemned Hamas in the strongest possible terms. We know that Hamas must be stopped. And we have also underlined that how that happens matters to all of us. How Israel responds in this moment is crucial.

As a Parliament we have always and will always keep insisting on respect for international law, that the humanitarian consequences of stopping Hamas must be a priority and that aid must be able to reach the innocent people in need.

People also look to Europe to continue to act over the unfolding desperate crisis in Gaza that continues to see too many innocent lives lost and too many children orphaned.

As a Union, we have a responsibility to remain coherent and united. To do this is not to condone more death and violence but to avoid a dangerous regional escalation of the conflict. We must leave even a sliver of possibility that peace can ultimately be found.

Hamas do not offer any hope for peace; they offer only bloodshed. Their vile actions have set-back prospects by years, or even decades. With every day 200 hostages remain in Hamas' captivity, we are a day further away. And here we must also examine the role of the Iranian regime in the region.

I also must underline that taking a strong stance against terror, as we must do, and making every effort to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, as we must do, are not mutually exclusive.

That is why we keep doing everything that we can to protect innocent lives. Why we work to free hostages and get aid across and why the European Parliament has called for a humanitarian pause to achieve that. It is why we welcomed the European Commission's tripling of humanitarian aid.

That is in the immediate term. In the longer term, Europe should stand ready and willing to engage. We must continue to push for sustainable and lasting peace. For a fair two-state solution that is equitable and just. There is a role for Europe and we have a duty to meet this moment.

And while the events in the Middle East remain at the top of our concerns, we must also deal with other pressing issues and geo-political realities: Russia's continued brutal invasion into Ukraine, what happened in Nagorno-Karabakh, tensions in the Balkans, Belarussian democracy still being attacked, our role vis-a-vis China, India and the Trans-Atlantic relationship - will all frame how the European Union adapts to our place in this new world.

How can we address concerns on security and on migration? How can we ensure our competitiveness in the world and our prosperity at home? What must Europe do to ensure it remains a superpower of values and one that is able to respond to citizens' concerns?

Last week, Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan spoke in the Parliament about the recent escalations in Nagorno-Karabakh. He described Armenia's management of the influx of refugees and expressed security concerns for the region, the road to peace is difficult but we are hopeful that the situation will allow meaningful talks to continue soon.

All this while the illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine continues. The Kremlin is counting on our support to waiver but we cannot allow fatigue to set-in and we will not. Our support will continue in humanitarian, logistical, military, reconstruction and political terms.

In a few weeks, the Commission will present its anticipated enlargement package. Ukraine's commitment to implementing democratic reforms and delivering on the Commission's recommendations has been remarkable. So, provided that the conditions are met, I remain hopeful that agreement to open accession talks between the EU and Ukraine, and with Moldova using the same yardstick, can be achieved by the end of this year.

Giving our European neighbours a clear European perspective is achieving its intended purpose. But while Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkans are reforming and getting ready for the next steps – Europe also needs to be getting ready to do the same. This is becoming critical. We cannot be found wanting.

We also need to keep supporting Ukraine's recovery, reconstruction and modernisation. Meaning that an agreement on the new 50 billion Euro Ukraine Facility that the European Parliament voted on last week will need to be found. As a Union, we have shown extraordinary unity when it comes to Ukraine and I am confident that this will continue.

This goes hand in hand with the need to reform our Multiannual Financial Framework. If we want a meaningful 2024 budget - one that is fit for purpose - we need the resources to back it up. This will only come with an agreement on a revision of the MFF as soon as possible.

As things stand, our resources are limited. The pandemic, the invasion of Ukraine, climate change, energy and the cost of living crises, have all had their impact. Rising interest rates have caused our NextGenerationEU borrowing expenses to rise. The bottom line is that the EU's budget is stretched to the limit.

We have to make sure our priorities are adequately funded. We all agree on the need to address security and migration, to continue supporting Ukraine, to invest more money in Member States struck by natural disasters, quickly and effectively. When Member States look to Europe for solidarity and support, it is precisely in that moment when we should be there for them the most.

We need to back our words up with the necessary financial resources to implement them - and here let me say that more progress needs to be made on the introduction of new Own Resources that we already agreed on back in 2020.

The budget is the minimum needed to provide funding to the people of Europe - our farmers, students, businesses and regions - that want to invest, innovate, modernise and develop a Europe that is competitive on the global stage. That is

how we generate real, sustainable economic growth. That is what is necessary to sustain our competitiveness.

If we want to remain credible about all that we say we want to do, we need an agreement. Postponing will not help.

Allow me a moment on another topic that cannot be postponed: that of migration. Recent events and the increase in arrivals of asylum seekers have once again demonstrated the consequences of our current fragmented policy on asylum and migration.

Making returns more effective through faster processing of asylum applications, improving the modalities for returns and closer operational coordination and cooperation among Member States, third countries, EU institutions and agencies should be at the top of our discussions. Loopholes between a negative asylum decision and a return decision need to be closed. This can be achieved through the Border Procedure Regulation. More needs to be done - and I mean collectively - to progress on all the components of the Migration Pact to make sure that we get this right by the end of this legislative mandate.

People will look to us to deliver on all these issues before they vote next June. I know we will manage and let me assure you Parliament's willingness and readiness to play our part.