

Remarks by the President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola
European Council
Thursday 21st March 2024, Brussels, Belgium

Good afternoon.

We are meeting today 77 days from the start of the European Parliament elections.

We know what is at stake. We know how far other actors will go to try to disrupt our democratic process. And we know how much we need to work together to get out the vote.

In this legislature, we have put Europe's stamp on global geopolitics and we have defended our European way in an ever-changing world. We have become stronger because of the challenges we faced and not despite them. We have held the constructive European majority together and we must do that again.

Europe is delivering for our people, but we have to be able to get that message across every Member State. I want to thank you for the cooperation of your governments for supporting the European Parliament's campaign. Together with MEPs, I have visited many of your countries to try to burst through the Brussels' bubble and to convince our people, especially our young people, to go out and vote.

It is not an easy task. And it is one made harder because we are seeing attempts in many States to push forward disinformation, misinformation and propaganda which comes from actors hostile to the European project. Who would specifically target different sectors in society and our communities and sell false narratives about Europe in a manner that we have not seen in European elections before. It is a threat that we must be ready for.

There are both legislative and non-legislative tools that we can make use of - particularly through how we tackle social media. Legislatively, we have the Digital Markets Act, Digital Services Act, the AI Act, political advertising and Media Freedom - but we must also be ready to engage better online.

We cannot allow this destructive narrative, propaganda and disinformation to spread without countering it. We also have to understand that the minute we pass a law, there is a new digital reality that we must face. This is an ever-changing reality that we must deal with. We have to be ready to engage with the platforms.

This election will be a test of our systems and makes our job of getting the message across even more essential.

So again my appeal here is to resist the temptation in a difficult campaign to blame Brussels for all that is wrong and give no credit where it is due.

We need to be open and honest about our successes - but also where we could have done better. Where we did not match the expectations of our people. Where people still feel left behind. Where our bureaucracy has pushed people away.

Our industry must be part of the equation. Our farmers have to be a part of the equation. Our young people must be part of the equation. People must have confidence in the process, they

must have access to tools that allow them to make the shift and they must be able to afford it. Otherwise, it will not succeed. And if misunderstood, it risks driving more people into political disenfranchisement and allow them to retreat to the comfort of the extremes.

That would simply give fuel to those actors who still see Europe as a threat. Who would like nothing better than for us to become weaker.

The European Union is not perfect, but it is the best guarantee for all of our people. So where we need to fix - let us do so. But let us keep building rather than allow easy cynicism to destroy.

We can hand back a Europe that is stronger, that listens to its citizens, that works better, that is more efficient and effective. That - as Jean Claude Juncker famously put it - is big on the big things and small on the small things.

And there is nothing bigger than the threat posed to peace by Russia. We must continue to do everything within our power to help Ukraine to continue to defend itself.

We have already provided strong political, diplomatic, humanitarian, economic and military support to Ukraine, and here the European Parliament welcomes the adoption of the 13th package of sanctions, and the Ukraine Assistance Fund under the European Peace Facility.

In this critical moment, our support of Ukraine cannot waver. We need to speed-up and intensify the delivery of equipment that they need.

We also have to help Ukraine by prolonging the Autonomous Trade Measures. The provisional agreement that we reached this week, seeks to help Ukraine while at the same time protecting our farmers and our internal market.

The provisional agreement includes an extended list of sensitive products and shortened time period for the activation of the automatic safeguard. These should help to ensure no market distortions.

We must also continue our efforts in ensuring justice, accountability and ultimately - peace.

Our project of peace depends on our ability to be secure and autonomous. So if we are serious about protecting our collective security we also need to take action on building a new EU security framework.

In shaping this new architecture, we have already found agreement on several issues that many thought impossible. Now we must be ready for the next step of cooperation between us all. In this new world, going alone will not work.

That is also why enlargement remains a priority. For Ukraine, for Moldova, for Georgia and for Bosnia and Herzegovina. For us all.

Of course, they all need to follow their own path and fulfil all the criteria required - but - with Ukraine in particular - their progress in meeting the milestones has been impressive.

In the last twelve months, Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina have also made remarkable progress in reforms. It is time to make good on our word. It is time to open EU accession

negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina and send a clear signal to people in the Western Balkans.

In this new geostrategic environment, an enlarged EU that is based on clear objectives, criteria and merit, will always serve as our best investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity.

At the same time we cannot lose sight of the fact that an enlarged EU will require change. Adaptation. Reform. The Parliament has made several proposals to this effect including those on the European Parliament's right of inquiry, which has seen little movement over the past 12 years, and the triggering of the process for a European Convention.

Enlargement will also help boost European competitiveness and improve the functioning of our single market. This must be a priority for the next legislature. That is how we grow our economies sustainably. How we pay our debts. How we create jobs and attract investment. How we ensure that growth works for everyone. It is with a strong economy that we can bring prosperity, security and stability. How we can reinforce Europe's place in the world.

A strong Europe has a role to play in the shifting sands of the world order - not least in the Middle East.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza is desperate. We need to use all the tools at our disposal to get more aid in. I welcome the Amalthea Initiative and would like to especially thank Cyprus for your leadership. Nonetheless, land distribution of aid remains the best avenue to deliver the volumes needed.

That is why the European Parliament will keep pushing for a ceasefire. Why we will keep demanding the return of the remaining hostages and why we underline that Hamas can no longer operate with impunity.

This is why we ask for clear conclusions on this today that will give direction going forward.

That is how we get more aid into Gaza, how we save innocent lives and how we push forward the urgent need for a two-state solution that gives real perspective to Palestinians and security to Israel.

A peace that empowers peaceful, legitimate, Palestinian leadership and that ensures lasting stability in the region.

This also concerns the situation in the Red Sea. I welcome the EUNAVFOR Aspides which will help protect this highly strategic maritime corridor. But there is more that we can do.

Across the Euro-Mediterranean, businesses are hugely impacted by delays, problems with warehousing and financial implications. We should consider an EU-led taskforce to assess how we can act together to mitigate the socio-economic consequences. There is a role for Europe to play here too.

Finally, as this is the last formal European Council before the elections, let me assure you that the European Parliament will keep working until the last moment to deliver on the remaining legislative files, including on a new migration package.

Ultimately delivering on our priorities is our best tool to push back against disinformation and where citizens can see the difference that Europe makes.

Thank you for your continued commitment, and a special thank you to the Belgian Presidency for what it has already achieved so far. Whether that is on legislation, on listening to citizens' concerns, on raising awareness about the elections and helping to get out the vote, on helping us ensure that the new Parliament is ready for its transition.

Thank you.