

Statement by Federica Mogherini and Johannes Hahn on today's developments in Skopje

We condemn in the strongest terms today's ongoing attacks on the Members of the Parliament in Skopje. The acts of violence in the Parliament are wholly unacceptable and we call for calm and restraint. The Interior Ministry and the police must ensure the security of the Parliament and its members.

Democracy must run its course. We take positive note of the election of Talat Xhaferi as Speaker of the Parliament, as reported.

The European Union is convinced that political dialogue in the institutions is the only way forward and we urge all political actors to honour the Constitution of the country and act in the spirit of democratic principles, decency and common sense.

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is a candidate country and the European Union is ready to work with the Parliament on the necessary reforms to move the country forward on its European path.

Article – New beginnings: reassessing EU-Turkey relations

From trade to Nato, the EU and Turkey have enjoyed a productive relationship in many domains for decades. However, recently relations have turned frosty as concerns mount over the state of democracy in the country with media outlets being closed and journalists being jailed. MEPs also keep a close eye on developments and wonder if it may not be time to rethink how the EU cooperates with Turkey. Read on for an overview of the options.

Relations hit a new low with the referendum in Turkey on 16 April to give the president additional powers, which could disrupt the balance of powers in the country.

EU membership

Turkey has been an associate member of the European Economic Community since 1963 and applied to join in 1987. It was recognised as a candidate for EU membership in 1999, but negotiations didn't start until 2005. So far 16 out

of 35 chapters have been opened and only one has been closed. Last November MEPs adopted a [resolution](#) asking for the negotiations to be temporarily suspended while repression continues in Turkey.

During a debate on the situation in Turkey on 26 April President Antonio Tajani said: "The European Union does not intend in any way to close the door to the Turkish people, who remain our friends." At the same time we cannot look the other way when events proceed in the opposite way of European construction. "Freedom of the press, freedom of expression, are vital rights for anyone wanting to join the European Union and the death penalty, similarly, is an inviolable red line."

Some MEPs proposed to go even further. Manfred Weber (EPP, Germany) said: "Turkey is going in the wrong direction. It's time for us to reassess our relationship. For the EPP full membership of the EU for Turkey is no longer realistic. We have to put an end to any form of hypocrisy. " Meanwhile

Syed Kamall (ECR, UK) said: "We need to be honest with Turkey that it may never be a member of the EU."

Dutch S&D member Kati Piri, Parliament's rapporteur on Turkey's accession progress, argued against formally ending membership talks. "There are millions of people in Turkey that do share the same European values . Millions that do want the EU to remain the anchor for reforms in their country."

Association agreement

The EU has the option of concluding association agreements with nearby countries, such as Iceland, Tunisia. These agreements set up a framework for cooperation in different field and the EU already has one with Turkey. During the debate on 27 April Guy Verhofstadt (ALDE, Belgium) proposed creating a new association agreement with Turkey focussing on trade and restoring civil society. "I think it's critical now to go into a new cooperation and to do a new proposal to Turkey."

Customs union

Last December the European Commission proposed updating the existing customs union with Turkey and extending bilateral trade relations. Once negotiations have been completed, the agreement would still have to be approved by the Parliament before it could enter into force.

Ska Keller (Greens/EFA, Germany) said the talks on the customs union should be used to improve the human rights situation in Turkey: "We should not upgrade [the customs union] before substantial improvements on human rights."

The EU is by far Turkey's largest export market (44.5%), while Turkey is the EU's fourth largest export market (4.4%).

Other forms of cooperation

Both Turkey and most EU countries are members of Nato. In addition they work together on issues such as migration. In March 2016 the EU and Turkey concluded an agreement to tackle the migration crisis. The deal led to significantly fewer migrants reaching Europe illegally.

Press release – EP urges Venezuela to restore democratic order and free all political prisoners

Venezuela’s government must ensure the full restoration of the democratic order and immediately release all political prisoners, urged Parliament on Thursday.

In a resolution adopted by 450 votes to 35, with 100 abstentions, Parliament strongly condemns the “brutal repression” exercised by the Venezuelan security forces, as well as irregular armed groups, against the peaceful protests, as a result of which more than 20 people have died and many wounded.

MEPs denounce the continuing unconstitutional violation of the democratic order in Venezuela and the lack of separation of powers and independence of the branches of government. They object to the Supreme Court’s recent decision to suspend the powers of the National Assembly (controlled by the opposition), which they consider to be an undemocratic act that violates the Constitution.

The text backs mediation efforts by many countries in the region and calls on the EU’s High Representative for foreign policy to explore actively with international and regional organisations “other measures that would enable the EU to restore full democracy to Venezuela”.

Release political prisoners and allow free elections

The European Parliament stresses that “there can be no durable peaceful solution for Venezuela in the long term if there are political prisoners”. It urges the government to present an electoral calendar allowing free and transparent electoral processes and to stop side-lining opposition leaders by depriving them of their political rights.

Humanitarian crisis

MEPs also ask the authorities to allow humanitarian aid into the country, and calls on the international community, and particularly EU countries, to consider the humanitarian crisis that may arise as a result of the large numbers of Venezuelans leaving the country.

Procedure: Non-legislative resolution

Press release – Textile imports: MEPs push for EU rules to curb worker exploitation

EU rules are needed to oblige textile and clothing suppliers to respect workers' rights, say MEPs in a resolution adopted on Thursday.

Textile workers around the world, many of whom are young women and children, suffer long working hours, low wages, uncertainty, violence and hazardous conditions. These practices also harm the EU industry, as they result in social dumping, MEPs note in a non-binding resolution.

In an effort to push the “flagship initiative” aimed at preventing tragedies like the April 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh, MEPs suggest a series of measures:

- **due diligence obligations:** the EU Commission should table a binding legislative proposal for a due diligence system, based on [OECD guidelines](#) and similar to those for the so-called blood minerals, that covers the whole supply chain,
- **conditional trade preferences:** the EU should ensure that textile exporting countries with preferential access to the EU market comply with obligations and produce sustainable textiles, while member states should promote workers' rights in their relations with partner countries,

Quote by lead MEP

“We cannot turn a blind eye, if our clothes are made at the cost of vast human suffering. Only binding rules could guarantee that products sold on European markets do not violate the dignity and the rights of millions of workers. The EU has the means to act and we ask the Commission to do so.” said rapporteur Lola Sánchez Caldentey (GUE/NGL, ES).

The resolution was adopted by 505 votes against 49 with 57 abstentions.

Background

According to the World Trade Organisation, more than 70% of EU textiles and clothing imports come from Asia, with China, Bangladesh, India, Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia as the largest producers. Most buyers are global brands looking for low prices and tight production timeframes and the consequences usually fall upon factory workers. After the Rana Plaza tragedy, in which over 1,100 people died when a factory building collapsed in Dhaka, Bangladesh, the EU Commission promised to bring forward an EU wide flagship initiative, but has so far failed to do so. Parliament wants to encourage the Commission to table this package of proposals.

Procedure: non-legislative resolution

[Press release – EU spending for 2015 approved](#)

The Commission managed the 2015 EU budget funds according to the rules, so MEPs granted it a “discharge” approval for that year, in a resolution voted on Thursday.

Parliament’s management of its own budget in 2015 was approved as well. By contrast, Parliament postponed approving spending by the Council of Ministers and the European Council.

Error rate down...

The payments error rate fell from 4.4% in 2014 to 3.8% in 2015, which remains above the 2% threshold beneath which the European Court of Auditors could classify payments as “error-free”, MEPs note.

...but a new payment crisis looms

Parliament deplores substantial backlogs in the use of 2007-2013 European structural and investment (ESI) funds. By the end of 2015, payment of 10% of the €446.2 billion allocated was still outstanding, MEPs note. They stress that “this situation may indeed pose a significant challenge and undermine the effectiveness of ESI Funds” in a number of member states.

The ongoing payments backlog, as well as global economic recession, could mean that “delays in budget execution for the 2014-2020 programming period will be greater than those experienced for the 2007-2013”, MEPs regret.

Climate spending shortfall and budget fragmentation

MEPs deplore the fact that climate-related spending accounted for only 17.3% in 2015, even though the objective was to reach at least, 20% over the financial period – a target which may not be met any more without more effort to tackle climate change.

Parliament also criticizes the fragmentation of the EU budget, which is implemented through “different tools and combinations between them as for example programmes, structural and investment funds, trust funds, strategic investment fund, guarantee funds, facilities, financial instruments, macro-financial assistance instruments”. These “various shadow budgets” undermine the credibility of the EU budget, warn MEPs, who demand that funding arrangements be made “clearer, simpler, more coherent.”

Council discharge postponed

For the seventh consecutive year, the Budgetary Control Committee had recommended that Parliament postpone granting discharge to the [Council of Ministers](#) and the [European Council](#) (heads of state or government) due to their failure to cooperate with Parliament by supplying the figures it needs to assess spending.

Background

The EU Commission is legally responsible for the biggest chunk of the funds, amounting to €145.2 billion in 2015, but around 80% of all EU funding is in fact managed locally, by EU member states.

The EU budget is always balanced, which means no single euro is spent on debt.

The decision on whether to grant discharge for the execution of the EU budget is made by the European Parliament, acting on a non-binding recommendation by the [Council](#), the other arm of the EU budgetary authority. Another key institution is the [European Court of Auditors](#), the EU’s independent external auditor, whose reports are a fundamental part of the procedure. The discharge procedure has proved to be a powerful tool, which has had an impact on the evolution of the EU’s budgetary system, while helping to increase Parliament’s political leverage.