

Speech by Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament at the special meeting of the European Council 30 August

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today you will be making an important appointment, that of the new High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

Whoever is chosen for the post, this is a good opportunity to pause for a moment and think about our Neighbourhood Policy and the role the EU should be seeking to play at a time and in a world characterised by uncertainty and confusion.

Wars are being waged in our immediate neighbourhood, states are collapsing and civilians are fleeing as best they can from the most terrible atrocities. We are faced with highly dangerous conflicts, to our east and to our south.

The EU is doing much to provide humanitarian aid and fund aid organisations. It is right that we should be doing this, and it is essential that we should continue to do so. Our international role however should be a more ambitious one.

We are faced with a decision: are we prepared to act together, displaying a united front, as a European Union – and the Lisbon Treaty provides us with the tools to do this – hence being a credible player on the international stage, or are we happy to be a grouping of states whose influence steadily diminishes as the 21st century progresses?

People are looking to the EU to play a more active role on the international stage.

We must put national sensibilities to one side and finally reach agreement on a genuine common foreign and security policy, also incorporating a common energy and defence policy, which reflects the new global and regional realities.

Ukraine

The situation in Ukraine is hugely worrying. We want to see, and we need, a political solution to the conflict in eastern Ukraine. A direct military confrontation between Ukraine and Russia might well see the situation spiral completely out of control. The parties to the conflict and the international community must do everything in their power to prevent this from happening. With that aim in view, it is vital that the EU should adopt a coherent, united stance. The international community must be resolute in its response.

Today, you must discuss and reach a decision on possible further sanctions, on the one hand, and yet more determined diplomatic and political efforts, on the other. A more ambitious aid package for the people in eastern Ukraine, put together by the EU and its Member States, is also essential. Today, all eyes are on the European Union and it is important that this summit should send out a powerful message. The sanctions agreed on 31 July were an important step forward, increasing the pressure on Russia finally to play its part in de-escalating the situation in Ukraine. We are aware that sanctions invariably also hit the economy of the country or group of countries which impose them. By taking measures to support producers of perishable foodstuffs, the EU has responded promptly and wisely to Russia's own arbitrary sanctions. It is crucial that this support should now reach those affected quickly and with a minimum of formalities.

It is worth pointing out that these sanctions were imposed on the EU as a whole and not on individual Member States – a sign that Russia sees us as a single, united body.

We call on Russia to withdraw its own troops from Ukraine without delay, to scale down the forces it has deployed on its border with Ukraine and to withdraw all its forces from that region as soon as possible.

The European Parliament reiterates its call to Russia to take measures to control its own border with Ukraine effectively, to halt the ongoing incursions, involving movements of irregular fighters, arms and equipment, to cease all hostile actions and to put a stop to the infiltration of Ukrainian territory. Without effective controls on the Russo-Ukrainian border, no peaceful solution will be possible.

What is more, Russia must use its influence with the rebels and mercenaries to force them to lay down their weapons and withdraw back to Russia through a specially established corridor. In this way, Russia can show that it is serious about de-escalating the crisis. It is clear that no lasting peace can be achieved unless Russia plays a committed, constructive role in the process. Of course, the most important thing is to end the conflict in eastern Ukraine and stabilise the country's economy.

We must provide Ukraine with the financial and political help it needs to overcome these major challenges, so that it can continue to exist as a unified and independent country.

Now that early elections have been called for 26 October, the task for the newly established Ukrainian institutions will be to begin implementing the ambitious EU-oriented reform agenda. We look to Ukraine to continue its courageous journey along the road to reform, with the aim of

strengthening the rule of law, eliminating impunity and corruption, and guaranteeing compliance with international human rights standards, in particular as regards the treatment of minorities.

The European Parliament explicitly supports the signing of the remaining sections of the Association Agreement, containing provisions on a deep and comprehensive free trade area.

It is now vital that the agreement should be ratified quickly, because we are convinced that it will provide the impetus for political and economic reform and will lead to modernisation, the strengthening of the rule of law and stronger economic growth.

The European Parliament on its part commits to put the agreement to a vote through an accelerated procedure.

Iraq

The situation in Iraq is alarming. We are witnessing a humanitarian disaster. A million people are fleeing ISIS fighters and have become the victims of crimes against humanity.

The only possible response to the cruelty and inhumanity displayed by the terrorists is one of shock and revulsion.

We must not abandon the people of Iraq to their fate. The refugees, particularly the Yazidis, Christians and Turkmens, need substantial quantities of aid. We must provide this quickly and subject to a minimum of formalities.

The EU, along with many of its Member States, has already made funds available to provide emergency humanitarian aid to the refugees and to support the Kurdish regional government in its efforts to deal with the humanitarian crisis and halt the advance of the terrorists.

However, we can and must do more to alleviate the unimaginable human suffering that we are witnessing. And we must be prepared to make a longer-term commitment.

Please allow me, at this point, to make a statement of principle:

The need for humanitarian aid and the commitments we have made to deliver that aid far exceed the payment appropriations available in the annual budget and the MFF. Worse, the humanitarian aid budget this year started with a deficit carried over from 2013.

We urge the Council and Commission to overcome the backlog of payments for humanitarian assistance by approving the requisite budget amendments as a matter of priority.

It is shocking that payments by the EU should be delayed and that humanitarian operations should stall because of unrealistic, inadequate and inflexible budgeting, at a time when people in

places such as Syria, Gaza, Iraq, Ukraine, central Africa, South Sudan or Liberia are suffering and struggling to survive.

The security situation in northern Iraq poses a threat to the existence of the Iraqi state and to the status quo in the region as a whole.

The onus is on the international community to prevent the collapse of the Iraqi state and thus ward off the threat of a large-scale regional conflict which would inevitably have repercussions for the EU as well.

At their meeting of 15 August 2014 the Foreign Ministers rightly drew attention to the importance of stabilising the political situation in Baghdad, as a first step towards regaining full control of the whole area of northern Iraq, halting the brutal violence being perpetrated by the ISIS terrorists and guaranteeing security, peace and reconciliation in Iraq.

The appointment of Haider Al-Abadi as the new Prime Minister holds out the prospect of a new government with the capacity to act and to involve all social and religious groups in the work of running the country.

The European Parliament calls on all regional actors to contribute to promoting security and stability in Iraq, and in particular to encourage the Iraqi Government to reach out to all religious and ethnic groups and reorganise the army along inclusive, non-sectarian and non-partisan lines. We urgently need to step up our internal cooperation in order to stop ISIS recruiting fighters in our own countries. We must not forget that thousands of Europeans have joined ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

At the same time, we must work together with our international partners to draw up a global strategy to combat jihadi organisations, which are operating throughout an area stretching from the Sahel to Afghanistan

Middle East

After many weeks marked by violence and counter-violence, senseless killing and endless suffering on the civilian population, encouraging news from the Middle East reached us earlier this week.

I particularly welcome the agreement on an open-ended ceasefire in Gaza, and call on all parties to honour the pledges they have given. The easing of the blockade on the Gaza Strip is an important step in the right direction.

Now we need a comprehensive and sustainable solution.

The European Parliament welcomes the EU's willingness to play its part in improving the security and the humanitarian and economic situation of Israelis and Palestinians on the ground. The Council of Foreign Ministers was right to reach an agreement to that effect two weeks ago. Of course, the EU is an important partner when it comes to the training of police officers or civilian and administrative capacity-building.

However, the European Parliament takes the view that the EU, as a reliable and credible partner both of Israel and of the Palestinians, is in a better position than ever to launch ambitious diplomatic initiatives and push for a resumption of the peace negotiations.

The European Parliament has repeatedly stressed its support for a two-state solution.

The Commission

This autumn, the public hearings of the Commissioners-designate are due to start. As always, Parliament will scrutinise the candidates' qualifications and their suitability for their posts conscientiously and carefully.

At this point I should like to draw attention to a matter which is of great concern to Parliament and to which I referred at the European Council meeting of 16 July.

The individuals whose names are being mentioned as potential candidates for the new Commission are almost exclusively men.

The chairs of the political groups in the European Parliament have already made it clear that the proportion of women in the new Commission will be a crucial factor when Parliament comes to decide whether or not to give its approval.

Jean-Claude Juncker also specifically asked the individual Member States to submit short lists containing several female and several male candidates. Regrettably, only a few countries have done this.

A Commission which lacks an appropriate gender balance - which seems to be the case at present - may well end up not securing a majority in Parliament and being rejected.

However, we need a Commission which is strong and effective, which can address the challenges facing us, and which can take office with a convincing mandate from Parliament.

Thank you for your attention.