



FOCUS

March Plenary round-up

The March Plenary session of the EP was dominated by the 50th anniversary celebrations of the European Parliament. Among the debates were the Spring summit of EU leaders on economic growth, the situation in Gaza and Israel and the situation in Iraq. Safety on airlines - with MEPs supporting "sky marshals" - as well as ways of making Europe's transport emit less emissions were also on the agenda. The proposed new European Institute of Technology also got a green light from Members.

The week also saw MEPs give their support to a "health check" of CAP reform five years after major reforms. During the week MEPs honoured the victims of terrorism with a minute's silence.

For a full round up of all the debates and votes from Strasbourg, read the focus.

Monday in Plenary: Gaza, Airline security, Green transport

Opening the March sitting of the European Parliament its President Hans-Gert Pöttering led a minute's silence for an EU peacekeeper killed in Chad. He also read out a statement on the Gaza Strip saying "the peace process launched at Annapolis must not founder on violence and terror". Also on Monday MEPs debated ways of reducing greenhouse gas emissions from Europe's transport sector. Outside the plenary, parliamentary leaders launched a review of rules on the employment of MEPs' assistants.

Gilles Polin was a French soldier stationed with EUFOR mission in Chad. He was killed last week in the border region with Sudan. On behalf of the Parliament Mr Pöttering sent his condolences to Mr Polin's family.

Violence in the Middle East

Attention then turned to the recent upsurge in violence between Israelis and Palestinians. Mr Pöttering spoke of the "disproportionate military force" deployed against Palestinians by the Israeli army and the "murderous attack" on a Jerusalem school by a Palestinian extremist. He condemned "the violence by Hamas and other Palestinians extremists" and recalled on the government of Israel "to listen to those voices calling for peace rhetoric to be replaced now by peace acts and deeds".

He went on to pledge faith in a negotiated solution "the peace process launched at Annapolis must not founder on violence and terror" he told the House. He also announced a meeting of the new Parliamentary working group on the Middle East for a follow-up to the Paris donor's conference, to discuss aid on the ground.

Full reaction to this statement from the political groups can be found in the first link below.

Review of assistants system

Senior parliamentarians on Monday night unanimously agreed to a proposal from EP President Hans-Gert Pöttering, backed by political group leaders, to launch a review of the system for the employment and payment of Members' assistants. The review will cover the operation of the current system and examine possible future reforms.

Common rules for aircraft security

MEPs also debated a report that sets out new common rules to ensure that Europe's airports and aircraft are as safe as possible. The report, drafted by Italian MEP Paolo Costa (ALDE) calls for common rules on the screening and searching of passengers and baggage as well as security checks on airlines. The report - based on a proposed Europe wide regulation - also deals with in-flight security and the carrying of weapons on planes by so called "sky marshals".

Cutting greenhouse gas emissions from transport

Greenhouse gas emissions from Europe's transport sector already account for a quarter of all CO2 emissions and this figure is growing. Monday evening saw MEPs debate a report by Italian Member Gabriele Albertini (EPP-ED) which proposes new fuels, taxes on polluters and congestion charging among the ways to reduce CO2 emissions. He also wants to see airlines make greater reductions in emissions.

Both the Costa and Albertini reports will be voted on Tuesday.

Data protection and consumers' rights

In the wake of a bilateral agreement reached by the Czech authorities with the US on passenger name records (PNR), Commissioner Franco Frattini was called to the House to report to MEPs on the implications for wider EU policy on visas and the sharing of personal data with the US authorities. The House also debated data protection and consumer rights more widely, focusing on internet.

Mobilisation of the European Union Solidarity Fund for the UK

On Monday, MEPs discussed the mobilisation of €162.4 million from the EU Solidarity Fund to help meet the cost of emergency measures such as rescue services, cleaning up after flood damage, and repairs to essential infrastructure in the UK.

In June and July 2007 storms and floods caused an estimated €4.6 billion worth of damage in the UK. In events of a major natural disaster EU members have the possibility to request aid from the EU Solidarity Fund.

Tuesday in Plenary: Silence, EIT, Ilves and milk

Tuesday's plenary began with a minute's silence for the victims of terrorism, four years after the Madrid trains bombs. Later MEPs give a green light to a proposed European Institute of Technology and adopted new rules to make airlines safer. Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves addressed the House and warned MEPs that Europe must not fall behind in terms of innovation and research. The afternoon saw MEPs discuss milk quotas and CAP reform.

President Ilves delivered a sobering view of the drawbacks of the European Union. He warned the House of a lack of innovation and competitiveness in Europe and of the Union's increasing slide into protectionist trade practices.

To push the EU forward he called for the Reform Treaty to be ratified and for the Union to adopt a common policy towards energy - a step that the appointment of an Energy Commissioner would promote. Mr Ilves also spoke of the battle between authoritarian capitalism and democratic market economies telling the House that this "is probably the latest ideological-intellectual-moral battle we face".

He also used the address to speak about what he envisages being a European is all about. "National interests are best served when we all give up a little so that the Union as a whole is successful." He spoke of the need to create a strong sense of "Europeaness" and of "a Europe of Polish-speaking Portuguese, Spanish-speaking Estonians and Slovenian-speaking Swedes".

CAP Health check, rising milk prices

The Common Agriculture Policy has just undergone a "health check" by the European Commission and MEPs were anxious to have their say. Although the Agriculture Committee had endorsed the broad thrust of the Commission's reform proposal, MEPs criticized the proposed transfer of funds from direct market support to rural development measures. The limitation of direct aid to farmers got a lukewarm response from MEPs. "The Commission should take our opinion much more seriously", said rapporteur Lutz Goepel (EPP-ED), "especially in light of the budgetary debate for the period after 2013."

Parliament discussed another report from the Agriculture Committee on national milk quotas. As consumers complain about higher milk prices, Parliament is being consulted on legislation which would allow Member States to increase dairy quotas by 2% on a voluntary basis from 1 April 2008, thereby expanding supplies.

Rapporteur Elisabeth Jeggle (EPP-ED) and other members of the agriculture committee criticised the Commission proposal. "It is our political responsibility to do more than just to help liberalize the markets." She warned that a gradual growth of milk quotas might lead to new milk lakes in Europe in 2015, when the current milk quota system will be phased out.

For the time being the EP has only a consultative voice on agricultural matters. However, under the upcoming Lisbon Treaty, Parliament will assume full legislative powers in this domain.

Tuesday's votes

Parliament gave the go-ahead to the EIT (European Institute for Innovation and Technology) and adopted new rules on airport and in-flight security - including the deployment of sky marshals and allocated €162 million to the UK to help deal with flood damage. It also laid down new rules about access to information for the EU's ombudsman

Wednesday's Plenary: Spring summit, Iraq, EP at 50

The state of Europe's economic future was under the spotlight as MEPs debated Thursday's EU summit. The need for greater investment in research and development and the need to protect social conditions were just two of the aims advanced by MEPs. Members also debated a report that calls for greater EU involvement in Iraq and support for the UN. Wednesday saw a musical flourish in the Hemicycle as the Parliament celebrated its 50th anniversary with the help of the European Youth Orchestra.

Spring Summit: what should EU leaders concentrate on?

European leaders gather in Brussels on Thursday for their Spring European Council. As always, Parliament held a broad debate covering the issues on the table ahead of the meeting. Slovenia's State Secretary for European Affairs Janez Lenarčič told MEPs that the Summit would be concerned with progress on the Lisbon agenda for jobs and growth, energy and climate change and turbulence on the financial markets.

EPP-ED leader Joseph Daul pointed to research, investment and labour market flexibility as the best responses to globalisation, an ageing population and climate change.

Socialist leader Martin Schulz said economic progress should not be "uncoupled" from social responsibility. He acknowledged progress but warned that wages were not keeping up with profits.

The need for security and stability in the face of uncertainty in Russia, Turkey and the Middle East was stressed by ALDE leader Graham Watson.

Read reactions from across the floor of Parliament via the second link below.

Iraq debated by MEPs

MEPs debated EU involvement in Iraq, seeking ways to increase transparency and efficiency of EU aid and to give more support to United Nation efforts in the battered country.

The debate centred on a report by Portuguese Socialist Ana Gomes which called for a new strategy that will step up EU support for UN efforts to help build a safe, stable, unified and democratic Iraq. The report hopes that such an entity will uphold human rights and protect minorities in a way that could help promote regional stability and security. "Europe has to ensure that Iraq will be a federal, democratic state, when rule of law will prevail including human rights and women's rights," Ms Gomes told the House. The vote will be on Thursday.

Standing ovation of support for Betancourt

MEPs - many carrying her picture - gave FARC hostage Ingrid Betancourt a standing ovation and endorsed a call by EP President Hans-Gert Pöttering for her release and that of 700 other captives. He appealed to the Colombian-based FARC on humanitarian grounds, and asked for international medical help for any who may be released due to concerns over their health. Ms Betancourt - a French citizen and former Colombian Presidential candidate - has been held in captivity since February 2002.

50th anniversary celebrations

The European Youth Orchestra played Beethoven's Ode to Joy as part of Parliament's 50th anniversary celebrations. They joined MEPs, former EP Presidents, national MPs and leaders of other EU Institutions to mark 50 years since the European Parliamentary Assembly (forerunner of the Parliament) met for the first time.

Thursday in Plenary: Overseas Development Assistance, Human rights

MEPs debated the European Union's overseas development assistance, specifically the experience of the countries that joined after 2004, on the final day of the Plenary. Later, they discussed women in developing countries and how aid could help them. In the afternoon the traditional human rights debates focused on Armenia and Russia.

The EU and its Overseas Development Assistance

MEPs discussed the amount of gross national income that EU countries who joined the Union since 2004 should give for development aid. A report by Lithuanian Liberal Danutė Budreikaitė sets out the current situation. The objective is that they donate 0.17 % of GNI to official development assistance (ODA) by 2010 - rising to 0.33% by 2015

Ms Budreikaitė said. "In 2004 and 2007, the 12 new States became donors through the development policy but had no experience in the field...new Member States have limited financial and human resources: they should focus their attention where they have experience." She added that they had "a great experience of dealing with their eastern neighbours". She pointed to the complementary roles of neighbourhood and development policy and suggested the creation of a new parliamentary assembly of EU and neighbouring countries (similar to the ACP-EU).

European aid Commissioner Louis Michel noted that as the EU is the world's biggest donor, it has "duty to set an example".

Women in developing countries

German MEP Felekna Uca's (GUE/NGL) report on women in developing countries calls for measures to promote women's rights in areas such as responsible governance, employment, education, health and violence against women.

Ms Uca said that more than 40% of women in Africa don't go to primary school, while 75% of agricultural work is done by women. She said tackling "traditional" forms of violence should be one of the main priorities while unlimited access to reproductive health is fundamental for gender equality.

Human rights Armenia, Russia

In the human rights debates in the afternoon Marie Anne Isler Béguin (Chair of Parliament's delegation to Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) said that **Armenia** was facing "a political crisis" since Presidential elections. She called for an inquiry about the events during demonstrations of political opponents (where 8 people died) and the release of prisoners.

MEPs condemned the use of force by the police against demonstrators protesting in **Russia** after the presidential elections on 2 March. Bernd Posselt (EPP-ED, DE) said Dimitri Medvedev "has to move away from the Putin system" to "start with a clean slate". Ms.Alexandra Dobolyi (PSE, HU) called for a pragmatic approach: "Russia is a strategic partner that we need for example to tackle global challenges".

Afghan journalist Perwiz Kambakhsh, is facing prison for circulating an article on women's rights in Islam: MEPs called for his release and reasserted their opposition to the death penalty.

They also spoke about the case of Mehdi Kazemi, a 19-year-old gay **Iranian** citizen, who faces deportation from Europe back to Iran, where he could be tortured and even executed. Raül Romeva i Rueda said "The

president of Iran said that there was no problem in Iran with homosexuals because there are no homosexuals. What he didn't say was that the homosexuals are executed." The resolution calls for Mehdi Kazemi to be granted asylum or protection on EU soil.

Votes on Thursday

MEPs adopted a report on women in prison, calling for youngsters below 18 not to be in the same prisons as older people. They backed a report calling for Europe to become more actively engaged in assistance to Iraq and improve the transparency of its aid to the country. Finally, a report saying minimum taxes for diesel should rise to equal petrol tax minimums was also adopted