

EU-Cuba High-level discussion on human rights in Brussels

On 22 May, the EU and Cuba held their third high-level discussion on human rights in Brussels.

The EU delegation was headed by EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Stavros Lambrinidis and included the Managing Director for the Americas of the European External Action Service (EEAS), Edita Hrdá, as well as other representatives of the EEAS, the European Commission and the EU Delegation to Cuba. Rodolfo Reyes Rodríguez, Director General for Multilateral Issues and International Law of the Cuban Ministry for Foreign Affairs led the Cuban side, and was accompanied by Cuban Ambassador / Head of the Mission to the EU Norma Goicochea Estenoz, as well as other officials of the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Both sides had an extensive discussion on constitutional, legal and administrative aspects of citizens' participation in public affairs, notably with regard to the recent and forthcoming elections in the EU and in Cuba, where municipal elections will take place in 2017 and a new President will be elected in 2018. The EU underlined the importance of complying with international human rights electoral standards, including free access to media and to information, freedoms of expression, association and assembly so that voices from different parts of the political spectrum can be heard and participate.

In the area of economic and social rights, the EU and Cuba addressed the coverage of social protection systems and the promotion of social dialogue. The respect for core labour standards, the fight against discrimination and the inclusion of disadvantaged groups were also raised.

The two sides moreover discussed the protection of human rights of migrants and refugees in the context of migration flows implicating Cuba and the EU, and the promotion and protection of the right to health, in particular for persons in vulnerable situations. Both sides agreed to explore the possibility of setting up a sectoral dialogue on social issues, as well as trilateral cooperation on global health in line with the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development. In follow-up to the last high-level discussion on human rights, they also addressed the situation of freedom of association and expression, including ways of engagement with peaceful civil society activists in Cuba and the EU, as well as on possibilities of all civil society to freely participate in public life. Finally, the two sides explored opportunities for closer EU-Cuba cooperation in multilateral human rights fora.

The talks reconfirmed the wish of both sides to deepen their dialogue and understanding in the area of human rights, with a view to developing cooperation to attain the objectives of the EU-Cuba partnership. The EU and Cuba affirmed their commitment for even closer engagement under the EU-Cuba

Agreement on Political Dialogue and Cooperation.

Background

High Representative / Vice-President Federica Mogherini and the Foreign Minister of Cuba Bruno Rodriguez agreed in April 2015 to start EU-Cuba human rights consultations, anticipating on the negotiations of a bilateral Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement. The Agreement, which was signed in December 2016, will open a new chapter in EU-Cuban relations and contains detailed provisions on the promotion of human rights, an essential element of the bilateral partnership. It notably foresees the establishment of a structured Human Rights Dialogue that will allow both sides to share experiences and best practices, build capacities, and provide training or technical cooperation to address specific issues. The application of the PDCA should thus provide significantly enhanced opportunities for further discussions and dialogue in this and all other areas covered by the Agreement.

The Agreement is currently being reviewed by the European Parliament and should soon be applied provisionally, pending its ratification by Cuba and the EU and its Member States.

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Remarks by Vice-President Dombrovskis at the European Semester Spring Package press conference

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today, we have adopted the spring economic package – the highlight of the country-specific phase of the European Semester. The package includes recommendations for 27 Member States – so all Member States except Greece –

and fiscal decisions concerning several countries.

This year, the spring economic package comes against a positive backdrop: the European economy continues its recovery, now for the fifth consecutive year.

GDP growth, for the EU as a whole, is expected to be at 1.9% both this year and the next. All Member States are expected to grow. Employment has reached the highest number ever and public finances are improving.

We should use this as an opportunity to make European economies more competitive, resilient and innovative. And we need to make growth truly inclusive, so that all people feel the recovery.

This is the overall objective of the reform efforts we are recommending today.

They are targeted to address the specific socio-economic challenges in each Member State. They focus on how to use reforms to make growth more inclusive and reinvigorate productivity.

There is no quick fix. Inclusive growth requires time and a mix of policies.

Our experience shows that labour market reforms bring good results. Several Member States have implemented reforms to strengthen the performance of their labour markets and the sustainability of social protection systems. More needs to be done to provide well-targeted assistance to job seekers, which was also shown in our country assessments. We need to work to optimise social spending.

Social protection systems must be better targeted to provide wide and adequate income support to all people in need.

Income inequality needs to be addressed when designing policy reforms across the board. For example, well-designed tax and social benefit systems contribute to increasing employment and reducing poverty. We traditionally recommend shifting the tax burden away from low-paid labour to a tax basis less detrimental to growth and this is reflected in our recommendations to several Member States.

Relevant skills, effective education systems and life-long learning are essential not only for creating inclusive growth, but also for lifting productivity. Robust productivity is our guarantee for rising living standards.

So how do we raise productivity?

We need to support innovation and we need more investment. Many of our recommendations are targeted at addressing barriers to investment – for example, disproportionate regulatory requirements and burdensome administrative systems. For many countries we recommend opening up product and services markets, in a way to boost innovation and lift productivity growth.

Speaking of macroeconomic imbalances in specific countries, in February we left open the cases of Cyprus, Italy and Portugal – all experiencing excessive imbalances. After having scrutinised their National Reform Plans and following additional clarifications, we concluded that our analysis does not provide ground for moving these countries into the corrective arm of macroeconomic imbalances procedure.

On fiscal, although the overall picture of public finances continues to improve, several countries still have high levels of private and public debt, which need to be set on a downwards path.

Today we have positive news for Croatia and Portugal – we recommend the Council to abrogate the Excessive Deficit Procedures for the two countries as they have brought their budget deficits below the 3% of GDP and this for the whole forecast horizon.

As regards the preventive arm, there are 8 countries – Germany, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Sweden – that are projected to be at or above their medium-term budgetary objectives both in 2017 and 2018. These countries have no SGP-related CSR.

Unfortunately, we also see that there are Member States diverging from their budgetary objectives – this is why, for example, Italy had to take additional structural measures worth 0.2% of GDP this year.

And – we are recommending the Council to give warning to Romania on the existence of a significant observed deviation from the adjustment path towards the medium-term objective in 2016.

I will now pass floor to Marianne who will focus on employment and social aspects in this package.

Speaking points by Commissioner Thyssen on the 2017 country-specific recommendations as part of the European Semester Spring Package

Speech by Commissioner Thyssen in charge of Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility

Ladies and gentlemen, good morning,

Indeed, we have the highest employment rate ever measured in the European Union, and we have now nearly 233 million people employed.

Since 2014, when this Commission started, over six million jobs have been created in Europe.

While over 19 million people are still looking for a job, unemployment is now at 8%. This is the lowest level since 2009.

And last week our spring economic forecast confirmed that we are firmly on the path towards economic recovery and delivering on our priority number one: **more jobs and growth**.

But this growth needs to reach each and every one in our societies.

This Commission has made clear from the beginning that the social dimension of Europe is at the heart of our work. This means putting people first and delivering for them.

The core of our concerns is to address inequalities, both within and between Member States. Inequalities do not only divide our societies, but also put a break on our competitiveness and economic growth.

We are working on two fronts to make this happen. We have introduced a strong focus on **social considerations into the European Semester**.

We clearly ask Member States to pay greater attention to the social impact of their reform efforts— this is both a matter of democratic legitimacy and of economic sustainability.

Since its start, this Commission is itself also paying greater attention to the social impact of all our Commission policies and initiatives. This is even more so following the presentation of the **European Pillar of Social Rights**. Coordination through the Semester is one of the options to apply the principles of the Pillar and **make them a reality in practice**. Let me give you a few examples.

The first principle of the Pillar stresses the importance of education, training and lifelong learning. This is not “*par hasard*”, this is not a coincidence. It is a political choice in light of our improving economy, with employment picking up and a growing labour force. To keep pace with this evolution, we call for more **reforms to up-skill and re-skill people in Europe** in our Semester recommendations.

Improving the access and quality of education and training is essential to fight poverty and inequalities, but also to attract investment and provide our businesses with a skilled and productive labour force. We need inclusive societies and **labour markets, which leave no one behind**. In the new world of work we need all people on board.

The Pillar also calls for “a right to fair wages that provide for a decent standard of living”. In some Member States now, we recommend that the context of economic growth should be more reflected into the wages of workers, such as Germany and The Netherlands. Social partners of course have a fundamental role in this process. This is why we also call upon Member States to enhance the capacity of social dialogue where needed.

And of course the Pillar calls for social protection systems which represent a genuine investment in people in Europe; and which empower all people in Europe to live to their full potential. In the Semester this is translated for instance in our recommendations to some Member States to **improve** the adequacy of their **social protection systems**, among which Bulgaria and Hungary. Or to provide affordable and good quality childcare services, for instance for Spain and Ireland.

We have also recently launched the **new Social Scoreboard**, which tracks key societal trends and performances across the European Union. Having a clear overview of where every Member State stands as regards the social dimension, will for sure enrich the debate, strengthen our ability to learn from each other and also motivate Member States to accelerate necessary reforms. This important analysis will in the future also guide us in preparing the Semester recommendations and making concrete progress towards a “social triple A” for the EU.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our societies, economies and labour markets are changing radically. We must **be ready to harness the new opportunities** and **adapt** to the **challenges** these changes are bringing. The European Pillar of Social Rights provides the reference framework. The European Semester is key to drive the necessary process of reforms at national level. Now it is for national and local governments, the social partners and civil society at large to follow up and work with us for a prosperous and social Europe.

Thank you.