

New guidelines help citizens gain better and fairer access to their national courts on environmental cases

Today the European Commission adopted a [guidance document](#) on access to justice in environmental matters which clarifies how **individuals and associations** can challenge decisions, acts and omissions by public authorities related to EU environmental law before national courts.

The Juncker Commission has taken a step forward with the publication of these guidelines, providing the necessary guidance to citizens for better access to national justice systems. The guidance is intended to help individuals and non-governmental organisations to decide whether to bring a case before national courts. National courts can use it to help identify all the EU Court of Justice cases that they should take into account when they are faced with questions related to access to justice in environmental cases. With this guidance, national administrations are made aware of possible shortcomings in their justice systems and businesses are provided with greater clarity on what EU rights and obligations are at stake in the decisions, acts and omissions that concern them.

Frans **Timmermans**, First Vice-President responsible for the Rule of Law said: *“Legal certainty is a core principle for a Rule of Law based society, and it is important that we offer this guidance to all interested parties. Environmental law is at the forefront of our efforts to build a sustainable future for the EU, and everybody needs to have a clear understanding of their rights and responsibilities.”*

Karmenu **Vella**, Commissioner for Environment, Fisheries and Maritime Affairs, said: *“Environmental laws are about protecting people and their health. When public authorities fail to respect the rights and obligations under these laws, the public can hold them accountable. The new guidance is an important step in empowering citizens to take matters such as the quality of air, water and waste management in their own hands. By bringing environmental cases to the national courts, citizens can help ensure the correct application of environmental law across the EU.”*

The EU Court of Justice has issued a number of rulings clarifying EU requirements on access to justice in environmental matters. Examples include:

- How national courts should address pleas that municipal **air quality plans** do not provide for sufficiently effective measures to reach the air quality standards laid down in EU air legislation;
- The role of the public, notably environmental non-governmental organisations, in helping to ensure that the obligations under EU **nature** legislation are respected in the Member States;
- Assessment criteria that national courts should employ to avoid that prohibitively high litigation **costs** prevent citizens and associations

from exercising their role in upholding EU environmental law at national level.

Today's guidance note brings all of these rulings together in a single text, making it easier for people to understand them and their implications by providing one comprehensive document.

The adoption of today's guidance note will be followed by discussions with Member States which do not yet fully comply with their obligations, as interpreted by the EU Court of Justice. These discussions will also take place in the context of the process established through the [Environmental Implementation Review](#).

Background

Access to justice guarantees that individuals and environmental associations, under certain conditions, can have an independent national court examine whether a public authority acted lawfully in making a decision, act or omission affecting their rights. The principle guarantees consist of the right to be heard, a sufficient scrutiny by the national judge, measures to put matters right and measures to avoid prohibitive costs.

The guidance document is based on access to justice provisions in EU secondary environmental law and provisions of the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters ([The Aarhus Convention](#)), as interpreted by the EU Court of Justice. The scope of the guidance document is limited to access to justice in relation to decisions, acts and omissions by public authorities of the Member States. It does not address environmental litigation between private parties. Nor does it concern the judicial review of acts of the EU institutions.

For More Information

Factsheet: [Access to Justice in Environmental matters](#)

Info Sheet: [Environmental enforcement – What's in it for you?](#)

Daily News 28 / 04 / 2017

New Commission guidelines help citizens gain better and fairer access to their national courts on environmental cases

Today the European Commission adopted a [guidance document](#) on access to justice in environmental matters which clarifies how individuals and associations can challenge decisions, acts and omissions by public authorities related to EU environmental law before national courts. The

Juncker Commission has taken a step forward with the publication of these guidelines, providing the necessary guidance to citizens for better access to national justice systems. When public authorities fail to respect the rights and obligations under environmental laws, the public can hold them to account. National courts can use it to help identify all the EU Court of Justice cases that they should take into account when they are faced with questions related to access to justice in environmental cases. With this guidance, national administrations are made aware of possible shortcomings in their justice systems and businesses are provided with greater clarity on what EU rights and obligations are at stake in the decisions, acts and omissions that concern them. For more information a full [press release](#) and [fact sheet](#) are online. (For more information: Enrico Brivio – Tel.: +32 229 56172; Iris Petsa – Tel.: + 32 229 93321)

European Commission approves disbursement of EUR 23 million in assistance to Georgia

The European Commission, on behalf of the EU, has today approved the disbursement of the second tranche of EUR 23 million under its [Macro-Financial Assistance \(MFA\) to Georgia](#). The funds – EUR 10 million in grants and EUR 13 million in low-interest loans – will be disbursed in May 2017. This is the final instalment of the second of two MFA operations, each in an amount of EUR 46 million. The EU's MFA programme is intended to strengthen Georgia's external and budgetary positions and to support the government's agenda of economic, social and financial reforms. Commenting on the disbursement, Pierre **Moscovici**, Commissioner for Economic and Financial Affairs, Taxations and Customs, said: *"The disbursement decided today is part of the EU's long-standing support to Georgia and its citizens. On the back of successful completion of critical reform commitments and improved stability, but at a time when our partner continues to face a challenging balance-of-payments and fiscal situation, the EU's assistance will help alleviate Georgia's short-term financing needs. It will also support the implementation of key reforms aimed at boosting economic growth and job creation, reinforcing social safety nets and strengthening the stability of the financial sector."* A full press release is available [here](#). (For more information: Annika Breidthardt – Tel.: +32 229 56153; Enda McNamara – Tel.: +32 229 51496)

Commission publishes report following latest round of trade talks with Japan

The Commission published today – as part of [its commitment](#) to a more transparent trade policy – a [report](#) summarising the progress made during the latest round of EU-Japan tradetalks which took place in April in Tokyo. The report offers summary of the progress made in all areas of the negotiations, namely: 1) Trade in goods (including Market Access, and General Rules); 2) Non-Tariff Measures; 3) Rules of Origin; 4) Trade in Services; 5) Procurement; 6) Intellectual Property (including Geographical Indications); 7) Other issues (Institutions and Regulatory Cooperation). Work progressed in a constructive atmosphere, with both sides working with a renewed sense of urgency in order to respect the objective set by the leaders to conclude

talks as soon as possible. The recent Commission proposals made in the course of the negotiations can be found on the dedicated [transparency page](#). More information on the EU-Japan talks is available on the [website of DG Trade](#). (For more information: Daniel Rosario – Tel.: + 32 229 56185; Kinga Malinowska – Tel.: +32 229 51383)

EU to approve new projects to support peace, stability and job creation in the Horn of Africa

The European Commission will today announce the approval of new actions worth under the [EU Trust Fund for Africa](#) to improve stability and address the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement in the Horn of Africa region. At this occasion, Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development, Neven Mimica, said: *"This new package illustrates how the EU Trust Fund provides sustainable solutions to address instability and lack of economic opportunities, as they are two main root causes of forced displacement in the Horn of Africa. By promoting peace, stability and job creation, these new actions will help create alternatives for people to improve their lives to ensure that migration can become a choice for people, and not a necessity."* A [press release](#) will be made available as of 17:00 today. (For more information: Carlos Martin Ruiz de Gordejuela – Tel.: +32 229 65322; Christina Wunder – Tel.: +32 229 92256)

L'Union européenne et le Chili signent un accord sur le commerce des produits biologiques

Le premier accord de commerce de nouvelle génération pour les produits biologiques a été signé entre l'Union européenne et le Chili. Cet accord, [finalisé l'année dernière](#), permettra une reconnaissance mutuelle des règles de production des produits biologiques et des systèmes de contrôles de ces derniers. Grâce à cette équivalence, l'UE devrait augmenter ses exportations de produits bios vers le Chili. L'accord, signé par le Commissaire Arias Cañete, le vice-Premier Ministre de Malte M. Louis Grech et le Ministre chilien de l'agriculture M. Carlos Furche Guagardo, prévoit également une coopération accrue, comprenant un échange régulier d'informations, des mises à jour régulières des produits couverts par les règles sur le bio, et un système de règlement des différends à propos du commerce de ces produits. Le logo bio européen sera aussi protégé par cet accord, le premier de ce type conclu avec un pays d'Amérique Latine. Son entrée en vigueur se fera une fois les processus de ratifications des deux côtés conclus. Cet accord ouvrira de nouvelles opportunités de croissance pour le secteur du bio dans l'UE qui grandit en moyenne au rythme de 5,5% par an. Près de 6% de la surface agricole disponible dans l'UE est utilisée pour le bio. La vidéo de la signature de l'accord est disponible [ici](#). Plus d'informations sur cet accord [en ligne](#). (Pour plus d'informations: Daniel Rosario – Tel: +32 229 56 185; Clemence Robin – Tel.: +32 229 52509)

EU agri-food exports remain higher than previous years

The monthly value of EU agri-food exports increased by +1.2% (+ €131 million) compared with February last year, according to the [latest figures](#) published today. The monthly exports particularly increased for Russia (+86 million), China (+77 million), the USA (+58 million) and Korea (+55 million). For the 12-months period covering March 2016 to February 2017, EU agri-food exports reached a value of €132.2 billion, corresponding to an increase by 2.2% in value terms compared to the same period one year ago. Exports of pig meat did particularly well over the last 12 months with a recovery of +33% compared to the same period one year ago. Monthly values for EU agri-food imports also increased in February 2017 compared to the year before (+1.5%) which means that the trade balance remains stable compared to February last year at €19 billion. This month's report focuses on EU agri-food trade with Serbia. The EU is a net-importer of agri-food products from this country. While the EU is more oriented towards exporting processed products, the imports from Serbia are mainly commodities and other primary products. The full report is [online](#). (For more information: Daniel Rosario – Tel.: +32 229 56185; Clémence Robin – Tel: +32 229 52509)

Mergers: Commission clears creation of joint venture between BMW, Daimler, Ford and Porsche

The European Commission has approved under the EU Merger Regulation the creation of a joint venture by BMW, Daimler, Porsche, all three of Germany, and Ford of the US. The parties produce and distribute passenger cars and commercial vehicles, and also provide mobility services based on battery-electric vehicles. The joint venture will install, operate and maintain a publicly accessible high power charging infrastructure for battery-electric vehicles in several Member States. The Commission concluded that the proposed acquisition would not raise competition concerns because of its limited competitive impact on the market. The transaction was examined under the simplified merger review procedure. More information is available on the Commission's [competition](#) website, in the public [case register](#) under the case number [M.8376](#). (For more information: Lucía Caudet – Tel. +32 229 56182; Maria Tsioni – Tel.: +32 229 90526)

Eurostat: Euro area annual inflation up to 1.9%

Euro area annual inflation is expected to be 1.9% in April 2017, up from 1.5% in March 2017, according to a flash estimate from Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union. Looking at the main components of euro area inflation, energy is expected to have the highest annual rate in April (7.5%, compared with 7.4% in March), followed by services (1.8%, compared with 1.0% in March), food, alcohol & tobacco (1.5%, compared with 1.8% in March) and non-energy industrial goods (0.3%, stable compared with March). A press release can be found [here](#). (For more information: Annika Breidthardt – Tel.: +32 229 56153; Juliana Dahl – Tel.: +32 229 59914)

Eurostat: Quatrième trimestre 2016 – Le revenu réel des ménages par habitant en baisse dans la zone euro mais en hausse dans l'UE28

Dans la zone euro, en termes réels, le revenu des ménages par habitant a diminué de 0,2% au quatrième trimestre 2016, après avoir augmenté de 0,2% au trimestre précédent. La consommation réelle des ménages par habitant a progressé de 0,1% au quatrième trimestre 2016, après une hausse de 0,4% au troisième trimestre 2016. Croissance réelle du revenu et de la consommation des ménages par habitant dans la zone euro (en %, données corrigées des variations saisonnières). Un communiqué de presse est disponible [ici](#). (Plus d'informations: Annika Breidthardt – Tel.: +32 229 56153; Juliana Dahl – Tél.: +32 229 59914)

STATEMENTS

Statement by Commissioner Thyssen on the occasion of International Labour Day

“Europe is home to the world’s most advanced welfare systems. The European social model has been a success story. But this is not a given. There are plenty of opportunities and challenges ahead of us. Globalisation, digitalisation and an ageing society – we need to shape these developments and make good use of them. Creating a more social Europe, one that protects and empowers workers, not only today but also in tomorrow’s world of work, has been this Commission’s priority from the very start. This is a matter of both social fairness and economic necessity: economic growth goes hand in hand with social progress. On 26 April, the European Commission presented the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#). It includes 20 key principles and rights for citizens and workers, which will support fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems. The Pillar will be our reference framework to guide future policy, so that we make sure that we safeguard and improve where needed the rights and protection of workers. We aim for broad political support and high-level endorsement of the Pillar towards the end of this year. Already now, the Pillar is accompanied by [four concrete initiatives](#) to update and complement current EU rules in key areas of work-life balance, the information for workers, access to social protection and working time. And we will not stop here. Delivering on the Pillar’s principles and rights is a work in progress, and further initiatives will follow where needed.” Read the full statement [here](#). (For more information: Christian Wigand – Tel.: +32 229 62253; Sara Soumillion – Tel.: + 32 229 67094)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Vice-President Ansip participates in Citizens’ Dialogue in Romania

This morning, Vice-President for the Digital Single Market Andrus **Ansip** opened the [Eurosfat 2017](#) conference on European Affairs in Bucharest, Romania. This year’s forum is dedicated to the 10th anniversary of Romania’s EU membership and addresses the country’s outlook as a Member State. Its opening session served as a [Citizens’ Dialogue](#) with an active Q&A session that mainly focused on digital topics with a strong emphasis on digital skills, the opportunities presented by digital transformation, and social empowerment. Vice-President **Ansip** also met representatives of the Romanian

Parliament and will meet Prime Minister Sorin Mihai Grindeanu this afternoon as well as hold a roundtable with several other Romanian Ministers. The many topics addressed during these meetings range from Romania's digital progress, digital skills, eGovernment and digitisation of the economy. Vice-President **Ansip** will also hold a discussion with the local startup community and visit [Innovation Labs](#), a project by Romanian ITC Ministry for young Romanian teams to turn their ideas into IT products. (For more information: Nathalie Vandystadt – Tel.: +32 229 67083; Inga Höglund – Tel.: +32 229 50698)

Commissioner Arias Cañete in Iran for the first-ever Iran-EU Business Forum on Sustainable Energy

On 29 and 30 April, Commissioner for Climate Action and Energy **Miguel Arias Cañete** will be in Tehran to strengthen energy and climate ties with Iran. On 29 April, he will kick off the first-ever [Iran-EU Business Forum on Sustainable Energy](#). The Forum will gather more than 50 European companies and business associations and some 40 Iranian energy companies to enable business relations and partnerships between Iran and the EU and lay the ground for further cooperation and joint partnerships in the energy sector. It will provide a platform for investors and businesses to look into investment opportunities for clean energy, renewables, energy efficiency and energy conservation actions in Iran. On 30 April, Commissioner **Arias Cañete** will open the High-Level Conference on Climate Change, which will bring together Iranian and European policymakers as well as representatives from International organisations. The aim is to review progress within the Paris Agreement and discuss the role of clean energy in the transition to a low-carbon economy and urgent actions needed to adapt to the consequences of climate change. Ahead of the visit Commissioner **Miguel Arias Cañete** said: *Only 16 months after the historic nuclear deal was signed in January 2016, trade between the EU and Iran has risen by 79%, exports from Iran to the EU have increased by 450%, and we have established a dynamic energy partnership. Now we want to take this success story one step further. The energy sector will feature prominently in our future relations and we are committed to fully tap into its economic and social potential while contributing to achieve our climate commitments*. The Commissioner will also meet with Vice-President of Iran and Head of the Atomic Energy Organization Salehi, Vice-President of Iran and Head of Environmental Protection Organization Ebtekar, the Minister of Petroleum Zanganeh and Minister for Energy Chitchian. Following the conclusion and implementation of the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action \(JCPOA\)](#), the EU and Iran have resumed bilateral relations and launched cooperation in energy ([Joint Statement on Energy](#) and [Joint Statement on Nuclear Energy Cooperation](#)). (For more information: Anna-Kaisa Itkonen – Tel.: +32 229 56186; Nicole Bockstaller – Tel.: +32 229 52589)

Citizens' Dialogue with Commissioner Andriukaitis in Seville

Today, Vytenis **Andriukaitis**, the Commissioner for Health & Food Safety, took part in a Citizens' Dialogue in Seville, Spain. He answered questions concerning health issues and the future of Europe alongside Manuel Jiménez

Barrios, Vice-President and Minister of Presidency of Regional Government of Andalucía. The event which took place this morning can be found [here](#). And click [here](#) to read more about the Citizens' Dialogues. (For more information: *Enrico Brivio – Tel.: +32 229 56172; Aikaterini Apostola – Tel.: +32 229 87624*)

[Calendar](#)

The Commissioners' weekly activities

[Upcoming events](#) of the European Commission (ex-Top News)

CALENDRIER du 01 mai au 07 mai 2017

(Susceptible de modifications en cours de semaine)

Déplacements et visites

Lundi 01 mai 2017

Labour Day

Mr Phil **Hogan** in Canada (until 03/05): in Ottawa, meets Mr Lawrence MacAulay, Minister for Agriculture and Agri-Food of Canada; members of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food; and representatives of the Canadian Agri-Food Trade Alliance (CAFTA); in Toronto, visits the Irish Potato Famine Memorial.

Mardi 02 mai 2017

President Jean-Claude **Juncker** receives Mr Antonio Tajani, President of the European Parliament (EP); Mr Mario Draghi, President of the European Central Bank (ECB); Mr Jeroen Dijsselbloem, President of the Eurogroup; and Mr Klaus Regling, Managing Director of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), for a working lunch on the follow-up of the Five Presidents' Report.

President Jean-Claude **Juncker** receives Mr Tsend Munkh-Orgil, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Mongolia.

Mr Frans **Timmermans** delivers a keynote speech on the eve of the World Press Freedom Day at "[Future Media Lab](#)" conference, in Brussels.

Ms Federica **Mogherini** receives Mr Tsend Munkh-Orgil, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Mongolia.

Ms Federica **Mogherini** participe au débat ‘Présent et futur des relations UE-Tunisie’ dans le cadre de la *Semaine Tunisienne* au Parlement Européen, à Bruxelles.

Ms Federica **Mogherini** receives Mr Enver Hoxhaj, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Kosovo.

Mr Andrus **Ansip** receives Mr Timotheus Höttges, CEO of Deutsche Telekom AG.

Mr Maroš **Šefčovič** in Paris, France: delivers a keynote speech on “Europe’s Space Strategy” at the École Nationale d’Administration (ENA).

Mr Johannes **Hahn** receives Mr Enver Hoxhaj, Foreign Minister of Kosovo.

Ms Cecilia **Malmström** in Paris, France: participates in the [“11th Forum on Responsible Mineral Supply Chains”](#) jointly organised by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) and UN Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Mr Miguel **Arias Cañete** delivers a keynote speech at the [“3rd Annual Energy Savings Summit: Europe’s People at the Heart of the Energy Transition”](#), in Brussels.

Mr Miguel **Arias Cañete** receives Mr Luca Bettonte, CEO of ERG Renew S.p.A.

Mr Miguel **Arias Cañete** receives experts from Hungarian environmental protection organisations; and representatives of Hungarian religious organisations active in the field of environmental protection.

Mr Karmenu **Vella** participates in a kick-off meeting to initiate a discussion on the principles for future investments in Sustainable Blue Economy together with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the HRH Prince of Wales International Sustainability Unit (ISU), in Brussels.

Mr Vytenis **Andriukaitis** meets representatives of the Federal Committees of Health, Environment and Social Renewal and the Federal Advice Committee of European Affairs at the Belgian Parliament, in Brussels.

Mr Vytenis **Andriukaitis** meets Ms Maggie De Block, Minister for Social Affairs and Health of Belgium, in Brussels.

Mr Vytenis **Andriukaitis** meets Mr Willy Borsus, Minister for the Middle Class, Small and Medium Sized Enterprises, Self-employed, Agriculture and Social Integration of Belgium, in Brussels.

Mr Vytenis **Andriukaitis** visits the Veterinary and Agrochemical Research Centre (CODA-CERVA) with a presentation by Mr Pierre Kerkhofs, General Director of CODA-CERVA, in Brussels.

Mr Dimitris **Avramopoulos** receives Mr Urmas Reinsalu, Minister for Justice of Estonia.

M. Pierre **Moscovici** à Paris, France: rencontre M. Pascal Lamy, Président emeritus de l'Institut Jacques Delors.

M. Pierre **Moscovici** à Paris, France: rencontre M. François Hollande, Président de la République française.

Mr Christos **Stylianides** receives Mr Abdul Malik Abdul Jalil Al Mekhlafi, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs of Yemen.

Mr Christos **Stylianides** receives H.E. Archbishop Shahan Sarkissian, Prelate of Aleppo Armenians.

Mr Phil **Hogan** in Toronto, Canada: delivers several speeches at the "[International Food and Beverage Trade Show" \(SIAL\)](#) during a session on the EU-Canada trade agreement, for the official opening and during the tour of country pavilions; and meets representatives of the Canadian alcoholic beverage and dairy sectors.

Ms Věra **Jourová** receives Mr Jevgeni Ossinovski, Minister for Health and Labour of Estonia.

Ms Věra **Jourová** receives Mr Giovanni Buttarelli, European Data Protection Supervisor.

Mr Tibor **Navracsics** delivers a speech at the opening ceremony of the "[Brussels Model European Union 2017 Annual Simulation](#)", at the Committee of the Regions, in Brussels.

Mr Tibor **Navracsics** meets representatives of youth organisations and young people in Brussels to discuss the future of EU youth policy in the framework of "[European Youth Week 2017](#)", in Brussels.

Ms Margrethe **Vestager** receives the board of Horesta – Association for the hotel, restaurant and tourism industry in Denmark.

Mercredi 03 mai 2017

College meeting

Informal meeting of competitiveness ministers (research)

President Jean-Claude **Juncker** receives Mr Jüri Ratas, Prime Minister of Estonia.

President Jean-Claude **Juncker** and the College of Commissioners receive Mr Jüri Ratas, Prime Minister of Estonia, and the Estonian Government for an exchange ahead of the Estonian Presidency of the Council.

Mr Frans **Timmermans** and Mr Julian **King** receive Mr Andres Anvelt, Minister for

the Interior of Estonia; and Mr Urmas Reinsalu, Minister for Justice of Estonia.

Ms Federica **Mogherini** receives Mr Husein Kavazović, Grand Mufti of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Ms Federica **Mogherini** receives Mr Carlos Raúl Morales Moscoso, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Guatemala.

Mr Andrus **Ansip** receives Ms Urve Palo, Minister for Entrepreneurship and Information Technology of Estonia.

Mr Maroš **Šefčovič** receives representatives of the European Engineering Industries Association (ORGALIME).

Mr Maroš **Šefčovič** receives Ms Kadri Simson, Minister for Economic Affairs and Infrastructure of Estonia.

Mr Valdis **Dombrovskis** receives Ms Véronique Willems, Secretary General of the European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (UEAPME).

Mr Johannes **Hahn** participates in the Conference on Trade and Business Opportunities in Jordan, in Brussels.

Mr Johannes **Hahn** receives Mr Yarub Qudah, Minister for Industry, Trade and Supply of Jordan.

Ms Cecilia **Malmström** receives Mr Yarub Qudah, Minister for Industry, Trade and Supply of Jordan.

Ms Cecilia **Malmström** participates in a launch event on ["New Trade and Business Opportunities in Jordan"](#), in Brussels.

Mr Neven **Mimica** receives Mr Sven Mikser, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Estonia.

Mr Karmenu **Vella** receives Mr Peter Thomson, President of the 71st session of the United Nations General Assembly.

Mr Christos **Stylianides** receives Mr Sven Mikser, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Estonia.

Mr Phil **Hogan** in Toronto, Canada: meets Mr Jeff Leal, Minister for Agriculture, Food and Rural Areas of Ontario; Ms Anne Sado, President of the George Brown College during a visit of the College's Food Innovation and Research Studio (FIRSt); and representatives of the meat, fruit and vegetables and confectionary sectors; visits a store of Loblaw's supermarket chain; the EU Member States' pavilions at the International Food and Beverage Trade Show (SIAL); and the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO) flagship store.

Ms Violeta **Bulc** delivers a keynote address at the ["Reducing rail freight noise: what should we do?"](#) conference organised by the Community of European

Railways (CER), in Brussels.

Ms Elżbieta **Bieńkowska** receives Ms Kadri Simson, Minister for Economic Affairs and Infrastructure of Estonia.

Ms Elżbieta **Bieńkowska** receives Mr Margus Tsahkna, Minister for Defence of Estonia.

Ms Věra **Jourová** receives Mr Andrew Langdon QC, Chairman of the General Bar Council of England & Wales.

Mr Tibor **Navracsics** participates in the official opening of the "[European Youth Week 2017](#)" in a panel discussion on the future EU Youth Strategy, in Brussels.

Mr Tibor **Navracsics** speaks at a high-level debate on Media Literacy and the challenge of "fake news" organised by the European Newspaper Publishers' Association (ENPA), in Brussels.

Mr Tibor **Navracsics** receives Mr Hans-Gert Pöttering, former President of the European Parliament and current Chairman of Konrad-Adenauer Foundation; and Mr Volker Hassemer, Chairman of *Stiftung Zukunft Berlin*.

Ms Corina **Crețu** receives Mr Mihhail Korb, Minister for Public Administration of Estonia.

Ms Margrethe **Vestager** receives Ms Kadri Simson, Minister for Economic Affairs and Infrastructure of Estonia.

Mr Carlos **Moedas** in Valetta, Malta: attends the Informal meeting of competitiveness ministers (research).

Jeudi 04 mai 2017

04 – 05/05 ACP (Africa, Caribbean, Pacific) – EU Council

President Jean-Claude **Juncker** receives Ms Erna Solberg, Prime Minister of Norway.

Ms Federica **Mogherini** hosts a meeting of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC), in Brussels.

Mr Andrus **Ansip** receives CEOs of the German Broadband Association (BREKO).

Mr Maroš **Šefčovič** attends a ministerial meeting with Ms Marie-Christine Marghem, Federal Minister for Energy, the Environment and Sustainable Development; Mr Bart Tommelein, Vice Minister-President of the Flemish Government and Flemish Minister for the Budget, Finance and Energy; Ms Céline Frémault, Minister of Brussels-Capital Region Government responsible for Housing, Quality of Life, Environment and Energy; Mr Christophe Lacroix, Walloon Minister for the Budget, Energy, Public Service, and Administrative

Simplification, in Brussels.

Mr Maroš Šefčovič exchanges views with members of the Federal Parliament of Belgium; and with the civil society stakeholders in the field of energy and climate as part of his Energy Union Tour in Belgium, in Brussels.

Mr Maroš Šefčovič in Antwerp, Belgium: delivers a keynote speech at a panel debate at the Smart Cities Energy and Climate Day, as part of his Energy Union Tour in Belgium; and participates in a [Citizens' Dialogue](#).

Mr Valdis Dombrovskis participates in the [Opening Ceremony of the House of European History](#), in Brussels.

Mr Johannes Hahn attends a meeting of the meeting of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC), in Brussels.

Ms Cecilia Malmström receives Mr Carlos Raúl Morales Moscoso, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Guatemala.

Mr Neven Mimica receives Mr Peter Thomson, President of the 71st session of the United Nations General Assembly.

Mr Karmenu Vella in Malta (until 08/05): participates in [Ministerial Conference on Strengthening Euro-Mediterranean cooperation through Research and Innovation](#); and visits Abertax Technologies Ltd.

Mr Vytenis Andriukaitis in Düsseldorf, Germany: delivers a keynote speech at the "[Save Food Congress 2017](#)".

Mr Christos Stylianides in Helsinki, Finland (until 05/05): meets Ms Paula Risikko, Minister for the Interior of Finland; Mr Kai Mykkänen, Minister for Trade and Development of Finland; representatives of the Committee on EU Affairs of the Parliament of Finland; and partner NGOs working in the field of humanitarian aid.

Ms Věra Jourová receives Ms Diana Wallis, President of the European Law Institute.

Ms Margrethe Vestager receives the members of the Copenhagen Executive Forum – Danish network.

Vendredi 05 mai 2017

President Jean-Claude Juncker in Florence, Italy: delivers a speech at the [7th edition of The State of the Union conference](#), organised by the European University Institute (EUI).

Ms Federica Mogherini in Florence, Italy: delivers a speech in the panel 'Cooperation and Partnerships, the European Way' at the [7th edition of The State of the Union conference](#), organised by the European University Institute (EUI).

Mr Maroš Šefčovič in Košice, Slovakia: attends the Europe Day celebration and

participates in a [Citizens' Dialogue](#) on the future of the EU, on smart cities and on the Erasmus+ Programme; meets regional stakeholders on smart cities; and visits a public transport system project with focus on electromobility.

Mr Valdis **Dombrovskis** receives Mr Andžs Ūbelis, Member of the Fiscal Discipline Council of Latvia.

Mr Günther H. **Oettinger** in Frankfurt am Main, Germany: delivers a speech at the event "European values in the crisis – what normative orientations does Europe need?" organised by the Goethe University Frankfurt.

Mr Johannes **Hahn** in Tbilisi, Georgia: on official visit.

Ms Cecilia **Malmström** in Stockholm, Sweden: participates in a public seminar on sustainable trade organised by the European Commission's Representation in Sweden.

Mr Miguel **Arias Cañete** in Madrid, Spain: participates in a debate on climate change and energy at *Confederación Española de Organizaciones Empresariales* (Spanish Confederation of Business Organizations – CEOE).

Mr Karmenu **Vella** in Malta: participates in Europêche General Assembly; and visits the IMO International Maritime Law Institute.

Mr Vytenis **Andriukaitis** in Vilnius, Lithuania (until 08/05): delivers a speech at the "[Life Sciences conference: ensuring the safety and consumers' rights](#)"; and a speech at the "[World Psychiatric Association's Inter Zonal Congress 2017](#)".

Ms Violeta **Bulc** in Florence, Italy: delivers a keynote speech at the [Executive Symposium: Shaping the future of the EU Maritime Transport Cluster](#), organised by the European University Institute (EUI).

Ms Věra **Jourová** in Florence, Italy: delivers a speech in the panel 'The Future of European Citizenship' at the [7th edition of The State of the Union conference](#), organised by the European University Institute (EUI).

Mr Tibor **Navracsics** in Florence, Italy: delivers a speech in the panel 'The European Union at Sixty' at the [7th edition of The State of the Union conference](#), organised by the European University Institute (EUI).

Samedi 06 mai 2017

Mr Günther H. **Oettinger**, Ms Marianne **Thyssen** and Mr Carlos **Moedas** participate in a [Citizens' Dialogue](#) on the occasion of Europe's Day, at the Open Doors Day of the European Commission, in Brussels.

Prévisions du mois de mai:

03/05 Informal meeting of competitiveness ministers (research)

04-05/05 ACP (Africa, Caribbean, Pacific)-EU Council

11/05 Foreign Affairs Council

11/05 EU-Tunisia Association Council

11/05 Agriculture and Fisheries Council

15-18/05 European Parliament Plenary Session

18-19/05 Informal meeting of energy ministers

19/05 Foreign Affairs Council

21-23/05 Informal meeting of agriculture and fisheries ministers

22/05 Eurogroup

22-23/05 Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council

23/05 Economic and Financial Affairs Council

29-30/05 Competitiveness Council

31/05 European Parliament Plenary Session in Brussels

Permanence DG COMM le WE du 29 au 30 avril 2017:

Lucia CAUDET: +32 (0)460 75 61 82

Permanence RAPID – GSM: +32 (0) 498 982 748

Service Audiovisuel, planning studio – tél. : +32 (0)2/295 21 23

European Commission approves disbursement of EUR 23 million in assistance to Georgia

The European Commission, on behalf of the EU, has today approved the disbursement of the second tranche of EUR 23 million under its Macro-Financial Assistance (MFA) to Georgia. The funds – EUR 10 million in grants and EUR 13 million in low-interest loans – will be disbursed in May 2017. This is the final instalment of the second of two MFA operations, each in an amount of EUR 46 million. The first one was fully disbursed in 2009-2010.

Pierre Moscovici, Commissioner for Economic and Financial Affairs, Taxations and Customs, said: “*The disbursement decided today is part of the EU’s long-standing support to Georgia and its citizens. On the back of successful completion of critical reform commitments and improved stability, but at a time when our partner continues to face a challenging balance-of-payments and fiscal situation, the EU’s assistance will help alleviate Georgia’s short-term financing needs. It will also support the implementation of key reforms aimed at boosting economic growth and job creation, reinforcing social safety nets and strengthening the stability of the financial sector.*”

The EU’s MFA programme was intended to strengthen Georgia’s external and budgetary positions and to support the government’s agenda of economic, social and financial reforms. The policy programme attached to the EU’s assistance, which was jointly agreed by Georgia and the EU in December 2014, included measures aimed at improving public finance management, fostering social inclusiveness and strengthening financial supervision. It also contained measures related to trade and competition policies, which aimed to help Georgia fully reap the benefits of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement (AA), including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), which was signed in 2014, provisionally applied from September 2014 and entered into force in July 2016.

Background

Macro-financial assistance (MFA) operations are part of the EU’s wider engagement with neighbouring countries and are intended as an exceptional EU crisis response instrument. They are available to EU partner countries experiencing severe balance-of-payments issues. EU assistance to Georgia is also delivered through other financial instruments, such as budget support.

In August 2013, the EU approved an MFA programme for Georgia of up to EUR 46 million, to be disbursed in two equal tranches of EUR 23 million. The European Commission signed a memorandum of understanding with Georgia in December 2014 and disbursed the first MFA tranche in early 2015 (EUR 13 million in grants in January 2015 and EUR 10 million in loans in April 2015). This second and final instalment follows the recent agreement between Georgia and the International Monetary Fund on a new assistance programme. Based on the findings gathered during a review mission conducted in November 2015, the Commission concluded that Georgia had implemented all MFA policy measures associated with the second tranche of MFA (worth EUR 10 million in grants and EUR 13 million in loans). The disbursement of this tranche was foreseen to take place in 2016, but had to be delayed due to the lack of progress with the implementation of Georgia’s programme with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). With the approval by the IMF Executive Board of a new \$285 million Extended Fund Facility for Georgia on 12 April 2017, the Commission has decided to proceed with the disbursement of the second tranche of MFA.

This MFA programme for Georgia is the second of two operations pledged by the EU at the International Donor Conference which took place in Brussels in October 2008, in the aftermath of the military conflict with Russia. A previous EU MFA programme for Georgia, also amounting to EUR 46 million and exclusively composed of grants, had been successfully implemented in

2009-2010.

Further information:

[EU economic cooperation with Georgia](#), including macro-financial assistance

[Information on MFA operations, including annual reports](#)

[EU investor relations website](#)

Remarks by Federica Mogherini at the press conference following the Informal Meeting of EU Ministers of Defence

Check against delivery!

First of all, I would like to start by thanking Carmelo [Abela, Minister for Home Affairs and National Security of Malta] personally and the Maltese Presidency for an excellent welcoming to all the Ministers but also for – beyond wonderful hospitality – an excellent preparation of our meetings yesterday and today. This goes both for content and follow-up, because as the minister mentioned the issues we discussed today and yesterday with the ministers of defence are part of a process both when we look at the work we are doing around Libya and when we are looking at our work to strengthen the European Union's defence and security work. This is something that is part of a bigger picture that is very much result of the work that the presidency has done together with other European Union institutions and Member States.

I would like also to thank you for an excellent debrief. Actually there would be little for me to complement: You were extremely complete in reporting about all the issues of our discussions today and also the visit and the meetings yesterday on the flagship of [EUNAVFOR MED] Operation Sophia. I would just stress two additional points or underline two political elements of what we discussed.

One, I will start from the last two sessions we had when it comes to the European Security and Defence Package. You might remember at the end of last year the European Council under our proposal adopted decisions that were extremely ambitious to push forward the agenda for more European Union defence and security. We have been working hard both to prepare that decision in December but most of all to make it operational afterwards. In Rome, on 25 March during the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome the need to be consistent and move forward on the European Union defence and

security cooperation was a very relevant part of the leaders' deliberations – simply because we see the demand for European Union defence and security work and because our citizens understand that there is a clear European Union added-value in this field because of the economies of scale, because of the cross boarders challenges we are facing and because only as the European Union we have the leverage both on the soft and on the hard power that can work when it comes to security and defence for the European Union.

So what we have done today with the defence ministers has been to review the different fields where we have decided to move forward on the European Union defence work: on the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO); on the mechanisms to synchronise our defence budgets among Member States; on the European Defence Action Plan (EDAP), meaning mainly the European fund to finance both research and capability development with a European funding that can be used by Member States to support cooperative projects; and also the issue of the deployability of the Battlegroups – rapid reaction forces that the European Union has for 10 years now, that have made us work well in terms of being able to work together, among Member States and countries that were not used to make their armed forces work together in a connected and interoperable manner. But now with crises we have around us we hear from our partners, starting from the UN and the head of the Peacekeeping Operations in the UN [Jean-Pierre Lacroix] that a rapid reaction force from the European Union would be needed to be deployed in some crisis areas.

So, we have looked in particular at ways in which we can overcome some of the obstacles to deploy our Battlegroups, in particular when it comes to financing their deployment. And after the discussions we have had today with the defence ministers – you know it is an informal meeting, so it was not set up for taking decisions formally – we will come back to a formal setup of the [Foreign Affairs] Council with the defence ministers on 18 May, both on the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), on the mechanism to coordinate our defence budgets and on the deployability of the Battlegroups. All of this will come back on 18 May with what I would expect to be a substantial decision – with [Foreign Affairs] Council conclusions – that can then prepare the ground for heads of state and government in June, or later this year if they wish so, to take bold decisions on how we can deliver on the Europe of defence and security.

Let me stress that this is one of the fields where the European Union integration – this year, 60 years after the Rome Treaties, but also the year when we launched the Brexit negotiations, as you might have noticed in these days – is advancing the most and I think is going to advance the most, including towards the end of the Maltese presidency [of the European Council] and then the end of the year.

I would stress the fact that on Libya we have discussed not only our [EUNAVFOR MED] Operation Sophia, our work at sea, but also we have gone through the rest of the work we are doing. Both politically to support the political solution of the crisis in Libya through our presence in the Quartet, together with the United Nations, the Arab League and the African Union to try and accompany different Libyan stakeholders in the framework of the Libyan political agreement, so that Libya can come together and unite and

face the challenges, first of all of terrorism, but also take the opportunities of a country that is a rich country if it manages to overcome some of its difficulties. We will have a further meeting of the Quartet on Libya in Brussels towards the end of May and it is always important for us to take the different aspects of our work with our Libyan friends and not only one.

I have updated the ministers on the other work we are doing on security with Libyans and around Libya, beyond [EUNAVFOR MED] Operation Sophia. First of all we have a presence working on EUBAM [EU Integrated Border Management Assistance Mission] Libya, working on the strengthening of the capacity of the Libyan authorities especially when it comes to civilian security, justice system, border management and aspects that need to be strengthened there but also the work we are doing south of Libya, with our friends in the Sahel, with our African partners to manage both the security angles but also the migration flows angles into Libya.

The situation is still very difficult, but we have seen some steps in the good direction. So I have registered today a very broad consensus among Member States on the need to continue with our overall work with Libya both at sea and at land, political and security and also humanitarian because we have € 120 million package that is being implemented inside Libya when it comes to support to the population; plus a € 90 million package when it comes to support to the IOM [International Organisation for Migration] and the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees], in particular to operate within the country to save and protect human lives, but also to work on voluntary returns from Libya to countries of origin.

I have seen, as I said, a very strong support to continue along this path – political, security, inside and outside Libya, at sea and southern Libya, – and also we will have the opportunity in the coming weeks to review strategically as we say both the [EUNAVFOR MED] Operation Sophia and EUBAM work and I believe there is an appetite, a desire from Member States to strengthen some of the fields of work of our operations and missions around that.

One last word – sorry it was longer than foreseen: It was very important for us to have today with us both the NATO Secretary General [Jens Stoltenberg] and the UN Under-Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations [Jean-Pierre Lacroix]. Both NATO and the UN are key partners for us when it comes to security and defence. With NATO, as you know, we are implementing 42 measures of concrete cooperation. Jens Stoltenberg and myself will report to our respective Councils in the month of June about the results of this. It is very concrete operations, including cooperation at sea in the Mediterranean but also exchange of information, or work on hybrid threats, or cyber.

And I would like to finish by stressing the relevance we attach to the work of the United Nations when it comes to peacekeeping but also conflict prevention. The European Union is for sure the soft power in the world by definition. As you see, we are developing more and more our hard power, but always in a context of conflict prevention, crisis management and what we call an integrated approach to security. I would say human security more than

hard security.

And this is something that puts us and the United Nations exactly on the same page. When we do peacekeeping with the United Nations, when we do humanitarian aid, when we do development cooperation, even when we do climate change work, this is for us part of security. It is not military, it is not hard power, it is not defence properly but it is part of security and for us the work of the United Nations is key in this respect and this is something that it is also important to underline politically in these times. And this is also something we discuss with our partners in the world. I stop here and I am sorry I was too long, but it was an intense couple of days of meetings.

Q&A

Q. On Libya, I wondered when you might consider delivering equipment to the Libyans? On EU Defence, when it comes to PESCO there are some who say that PESCO should include everyone and others who say it should only include countries that can bring something operationally to the structure. Where do you stand?

On Libya, we have discussed this also with the ministers today, as we have concluded the first round of training for the Libyan coastguards and navy and are continuing aiming at a larger number of trainees. We are looking at ways in which we can follow this up in terms of providing non-military assets that would enable those that we have trained to do their job in the Libyan territorial waters. So we are currently already looking at the assets that might be required, assessing the needs, the sustainability and the correct and proper use they can be devoted to. So this is an ongoing process already. By the way, bilaterally for sure one Member State is already delivering vessels, you know about Italy, and today we convened informally, that the European Union will look at these requirements in terms of assets, assessing the real needs and controlling every single step along the chain, because we want to make always sure that we trained the right people, we deliver the right assets to the right people and we follow-up monitoring closely how these assets are then used. We are already looking at that.

On the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), I can tell you very openly that there is not such a division. And you know I am always asked two things from journalists: if I am concerned about something or if we are divided about something. Concerned, there are a lot of reasons for concerns in these times, divisions not really, the amazing thing for me, and this is the result of a very responsible leadership in Member States, especially on Foreign and Security Policy, I would say, and defence. We have advanced on European defence in these last nine months, united, still at 28, doing more and taking more decisions in these last nine months than in the previous decades. And when we started, less than one year ago, everybody was saying: where are you going? You know, there is Brexit, there are divisions. It is the field for divisions by definition. Also on the Permanent Structured Cooperation, the work we are preparing is a very cautious one, because we are entering into a field of the treaties that has never been translated into reality, so we know that we have to build a very solid basis, get it right, make it useful, inclusive but operational. At the same time, and I have seen consensus around

the table today, there is the need of having it ambitious and operational, it has to bring added value to our toolbox when it comes to defence and at the same time be modular enough, flexible enough, so that all the Member States that want and have something to contribute with can be part of it. And I am extremely positive about the fact that in the coming weeks we will be ready to propose a defined set-up for eventually a political decision to launch it.

Q. What is your reaction to the shocking allegations made by the Mayor and Prosecutor in Sicily that NGOs are colluding with traffickers in Libya, they are being aided and he said he has evidence they help them to travel illegally from the Mediterranean basin?

On my side, I will not comment comments of the prosecutor. What we work on, on our side, with our operation at sea is crystal clear – it is fighting the smugglers, ceasing the vessels, giving to the justice mechanism and authorities the suspected smugglers and saving lives as an effect of our presence in international waters. Plus training the Libyan coastguards through the internationally recognised authorities and contributing to the arms embargo to implement a UN Security Council resolution. This is the work we are doing and I respond for the work we are doing.

We have contacts that we have established with all the actors and stakeholders that are active around the Central Mediterranean Route, including some of the NGOs, with the purpose of sharing our approach and also information in terms of who does what in the same area. But obviously it is not for me neither to comment on comments and especially those that are coming from judiciary authorities of one of the Member States and it is not for me, obviously, to either comment or take responsibility or take a position on the activities of NGOs.

We do not have as European Union evidence of that kind, but again I stick to the work we are doing: we are fighting the smugglers, we are also saving lives at sea and we are training the Libyan coastguards to try and have an effective work in the Libyan waters. Because this is the key today: we have seen that people dying at sea are moving closer to the coasts of Libya, an area where the European Union operation is not present and we will need the Libyan coastguard to operate in order to be effective exactly to dismantle the traffickers' networks.

Q: Tomorrow, we understand that the Turkish Foreign Minister will be here to represent his country as a candidate country for the EU. What do you propose to tell him in light of recent mass arrests in Turkey? Secondly, on North Korea: Washington has said overnight that it was prepared to talk about a negotiated solution in North Korea but was also ready to extend sanctions. Is the EU ready to extend sanctions against North Korea as well?

I was here yesterday and here today, I will be here tomorrow and I guess you will be as well, and we have a foreign ministers meeting tomorrow exactly dealing with the situation in Turkey, I will answer that question tomorrow, if you do not mind. Also because otherwise, I know very well how the rule of the game is, it overshadows all the rest we have been doing today on defence, which is very important.

And also on North Korea I can come back on that tomorrow. But I can say that the European Union, I believe, was the last one to adopt not only restrictive measures that are implementing UN Security Council resolutions, but also to adopt autonomous restrictive measures and that was just a couple of weeks ago. This is something we discussed at the G7 [Foreign Ministers] Ministerial just at the beginning of April in Italy.

Q: You have told us a lot about cooperation with Libya. Do you have or do you envisage, or would you wish for more military cooperation with the other North African countries and those around the Middle East? And would this also include talking to the American military facilities of which there are about 10, I think, in the Middle East and a big base in Djibouti? And secondly, did you have a preliminary talk with the British representative about post-Brexit cooperation on security matters?

As long as the UK is a Member State, is a Member State, I do not need to negotiate or discuss our security or defence situation because they are a full part of our deliberations. You know, I chair three formations of the Council: defence ministers, foreign ministers and development cooperation ministers. We are 28. And as long as we are 28 there is no separate channel, there is no separate role. The UK is a full part of what we are doing, especially on foreign and security and defence issues. And this was the case also today and this is going to be the case still for at least a couple of years.

On the future of our cooperation on security, foreign policy and defence, that will be a conversation we will have later on. But for the moment, they are a Member State, they will continue to be a Member State, and this is true also on foreign and security policy.

When it comes to cooperation with both Arab countries but also with our American friends: Our level of interaction is not with single basis but it is on the political level and on the military level and this is always ongoing. Both with the US – General Secretary of Defence [James] Mattis, but also National Security Advisor [H. R.] McMaster, obviously [Secretary of State Rex] Tillerson, Vice-President [Mike] Pence -, we often discuss about security and defence and related issues that are also related to our foreign policy work. Cooperation and coordination with them is ongoing as well as it is with most of our partners in North Africa and the Middle East. It is, I would say, on the level of cooperation with some of our partners, with whom we coordinate the most. Especially when it comes to Libya, our work is mainly with the neighbouring countries – Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, but also the Sahel countries – and with the UN, the Arab League and the African Union. But also on other crises we coordinate closely with other Arab partners. I think of the work we are doing on Syria, where we have a regional initiative led by the European Union where we bring together eight regional countries from Lebanon to Egypt, from Jordan to Iran, to Saudi Arabia, to Qatar, to explore possible ways of supporting the intra-Syrian talks. So, our contacts both on the political but also on the security level with all our Arab partners are very intense.

Two questions on PESCO [Permanent Structured Cooperation], if I have

rightly understood the decision to launch the cooperation could be taken at the European Council in June, or before, or after? I have some difficulties to see concretely how this cooperation could have an added value. I understand it is a political step, but in concrete terms for European defence what projects could be implemented? On the Battlegroups, if I may, all the Member States agree to have more common financial engagement to the Battlegroups? Or is it an ongoing process? And one question for the French: have you said goodbye to Jean-Yves Le Drian, the French Minister, or just "we hope to see you again in a new meeting"?

Les deux. En effet il a dit au revoir, on l'a remercié parce que les résultats que nous avons eus dans cette dernière période dans le domaine de la défense et de la sécurité au niveau de l'Union européenne sont aussi grâce à la France et au travail du Ministre Le Drian et il a dit au revoir et on s'est dit peut-être à bientôt mais cela dépend d'autres dynamiques que je ne veux pas nécessairement commenter ici, qui ne sont pas liées à la défense européenne mais plutôt à un calendrier électoral dans un des pays-membres.

Going back to your defence related questions on the Battlegroups, we are working to, as I said, remove some of the obstacles that have not allowed so far to deploy the Battlegroups even when there would have been a need to do so, or an opportunity to do so. We are working. This is an informal set-up of the Council so we are not expected to take decisions today but to prepare the ground for further decisions to come. You are familiar enough with the European defence mechanism to know that one of the issues is the review of the Athena mechanism and we are working in that direction.

When it comes to Permanent Structured Cooperation, I think it is possible to take a decision or to prepare the ground – which is my job – for a political decision to be taken even within this year to launch a Permanent Structured Cooperation, which is in itself a political statement, which would be the European Union is ready to continue its integration process, its cooperation in the key fields where the European citizens see the added value of the Union starting from defence. So, a political statement in itself, but also and to me even before that has to be a very concrete, practical added value to our work on defence and security.

So, you do not see the projects today, also because we are working on it, but the eventual launch of the Permanent Structured Cooperation would obviously indicate clearly which are the concrete projects – the output let's say – of a Permanent Structured Cooperation. It is not what we are doing in terms of preparation of this decision to be taken – again that would be a political decision afterwards – but in the meantime we need to prepare the ground and again translate the articles of the treaty into a serious and solid option for decision-making; has to and will have to be based on very concrete, practical projects that would be useful to advance the European Union defence capabilities and some of the Member States', depending on how modular and flexible this can be.

So, we are not working on a political declaration. We are working on something operational.

Q. [inaudible follow-up question]

I would not say that. To me the main point is that: you have seen, we have worked very fast, one year ago all of this did not exist. We adopted the Global Strategy last end of June, we started the work to implement the Global Strategy on Security and Defence issues at the previous informal Defence Ministers meeting in Bratislava, in September. We had European Council decisions prepared by Defence and Foreign Ministers, together adopted in December; we took the first operational decisions in that field already in March, but she said May – Defence and Foreign Ministers again – so the rhythm is that every one, two months, we have further steps in very operational and concrete terms.

It is important the speed, it is important the pace but it is also very important the quality of the work we are doing because as you know very well, we are talking about steps in the field of European defence that have been for long decades an issue of divergence that is not the case anymore, but we need to move not only concretely but also with a very solid political basis and operational preparation. This as fast as we can – but priority for me is the quality of the process we have put in place, the quality of the outcome that we would present for political decisions and the level of consensus that so far we have managed to build.

So, we will continue in this direction. It can be for the next months, it can be for the end of the year, it can be also for next year. But I am positive that this process is up and running and bringing good results, with a pace that I have to tell you personally I wish was there also in other fields of the European Union integration process. On defence, we are doing well, we are running fast, with good results and with a level of unity that is quite amazing. My personal view is that we would need to do exactly the same in other fields, but this is not for us to discuss today.