

Press release – European Pillar of Social Rights: call for highest possible common standards

Common EU-wide social rights, as proposed by the European Commission, the “European Pillar of Social Rights”, should be pegged at the highest level and not lead to a “race to the bottom”, MEPs stressed in a debate on Wednesday.

The Pillar’s three key parts – equal opportunities in access to the labour market, fair working conditions and social protection – were presented by Commission First Vice-President Frans Timmermans, who stressed the need to promote “upward convergence” among EU member states by reforming working and social conditions on the best available model.

In the ensuing debate, MEPs mostly agreed with the proposals, although several speakers called for more ambitious legislation at EU level. They also felt that more needed to be done to fight poverty and youth unemployment. Others pointed out that social security systems, which are costly, are the responsibility of national governments, and therefore opposed shifting more powers to EU level.

Commissioner Marianne Thyssen wrapped up the debate by reiterating that the pillar is the start of the process and provides guidance for better employment, while the details will have to be hammered out in consultations with social partners, and debates between the European Parliament, the EU Commission and the member states.

Procedure: Commission statement

Federica Mogherini’s visit at EUNAVFOR MED Sophia vessel ITS San Giusto

La Valletta, 26 April 2017

Check against delivery!

First of all, I would like to thank the Maltese Presidency that accepted to organise this visit for all the EU Defence Ministers here to the flagship of Operation Sophia in Malta, at the beginning of our Informal Meeting of all Defence Ministers of the 28 [Member States].

This is a way of looking concretely at the work that the European Union

Military Operation is doing in the Mediterranean. We got an extensive debrief from the Commander on how the operation is fulfilling its core mandate which is that of disrupting the business network of smugglers and traffickers at sea, but also how we are working on the two additional tasks in the mandate.

One is training the Libyan Coast Guards. We have already trained 93 Libyans and are now moving into the phase of providing them non-military assets to allow them to do their job in the territorial waters of Libya, so that the fight against smugglers can be more effective closer to the coast. And second, the implementation of the arms embargo of the UN Security Council Resolution 2292.

It was a very good beginning of our meeting tomorrow where we will discuss how to continue our common work. To me this is also a clear and very practical example of the fact that the European Union's work, including on defence and military side, is already a reality.

Here you have the European flag, here you have 25 of the 28 Member States represented and working in one operation – as it is the case for all the other 15 operations and missions the European Union has around the world. This means the European Union is more and more also an actor in the security field and our partners around the world recognise this as an added value. In particular because we have a special way of dealing with security which mixes the hard power, but also the humanitarian angle, and the first priority we have, which is to human rights and protection of people.

Q. What do you think of Malta's recent proposal that will basically mean that EU member states will get paid € 60 000 for every refugee they take in? Do you consider this to be some sort of placing a price tag on human rights?

That doesn't concern at all the work we are doing at sea or on the military or defence.

Q: It's related to defence...

No, this is related to the internal aspects of our way to manage the refugee or the migratory flows in this case. And I'm not commenting on that.

Q: Can you explain which kinds of assets you will give to the [Libyan] coastguards? Do you have some examples?

Yes, for instance ships that at sea can provide the capacity to the Libyan coastguards to operate in the territorial waters. So, it is very simple: non-military assets that would allow them simply to monitor what happens in the waters or to save lives. We know very well that the majority of the losses of lives now happens closest to the Libyan coast and so providing them the vessels that would allow them to move and monitor the waters is an essential part of our work.

It has also an additional positive element: security of the Libyan waters would also mean more possibilities for the fishermen of Libya to go out and fish and in this way provide an economic revenue – legal and sustainable economic revenue – that would be an alternative and would help to disrupt the

business of smuggling and trafficking; we know very well part of the Libyan revenues is coming from the human trafficking and smuggling.

So, it will also going to have another positive effect – that of strengthening the capacity of Libyans to fish in secure waters and in this way providing an alternative economy to them.

Buonasera, per Rai News, se ci riassume anche in italiano.

Abbiamo deciso di iniziare questa riunione informale dei ministri della difesa dei 28 Stati membri dell'Unione europea qui, sotto la presidenza maltese, con una visita sulla San Giusto, la nave che guida l'operazione Sophia dell'Unione europea che nel Mediterraneo contrasta i trafficanti di essere umani e salva anche vite umane. E' stata un'occasione per mostrare ai ministri di tutti gli Stati membri le operazioni, avere un quadro dei risultati già raggiunti: più di 100 sospetti trafficanti consegnati alle autorità italiane, centinaia e centinaia di imbarcazioni neutralizzate, più di 35.000 vite salvate. E anche di toccare con mano le sfide che sono davanti a noi. Tra i risultati raggiunti c'è anche, molto importante, il training che abbiamo completato per 93 guardiacoste libici. In collaborazione soprattutto con le autorità italiane, provvederemo anche a fornire alle autorità costiere libiche imbarcazioni che potranno consentirgli di monitorare le acque territoriali libiche, e in questo modo renderle più sicure, di contrastare il traffico di esseri umani, salvare vite umane, là dove in questo momento ce n'è più bisogno e cioè appunto nelle acque territoriali libiche.

E' un risolutato importante, là dove l'Italia era sola qualche anno fa, oggi c'è tutta l'Unione Europea: a salvare vite, a contrastare trafficanti, e a lavorare insieme a stretto contatto con le autorità libiche.

Si è parlato tanto in questi giorni di pull factor, non soltanto per gli assetti militari europei di Frontex, ma soprattutto per la presenza delle ONG. Però c'è anche un'altra realtà sulla quale forse l'Europa dovrebbe intervenire, ovvero il *push factor*?

Noi lavoriamo soprattutto sulle ragioni che spingono madri, bambini, giovani a lasciare il proprio paese. Sono ragioni legati ai conflitti, sono ragioni legati a situazioni economiche, a violazioni dei diritti umani in alcuni casi, al cambiamento climatico che provoca carestie. Questo è il principale lavoro che l'Unione europea sta facendo in partenariato con i paesi d'origine e con i paesi di transito, in particolare con i paesi africani. E' un lavoro che abbiamo iniziato da un anno e mezzo, che sta iniziando a portare i primi risultati, penso soprattutto al Niger, dove il transito di migranti è drasticamente diminuito da quando abbiamo iniziato a lavorare insieme alle autorità del paese. Questo è il principale fronte di lavoro perché il fenomeno è globale, non si risolve della mattina alla sera e soprattutto non si risolve unicamente in mare. Si risolve a terra, si risolve prima che le persone decidano di partire. Io dico spesso: se una madre decide di imbarcarsi in un viaggio attraverso il deserto e un mare pericoloso, nelle mani di trafficanti che riducono queste persone in schiavitù, non c'è *pull factor* che tenga- è il *push factor* che è quello che è determinante. Dopodiché

è anche importante garantire una presenza in mare che possa salvare vite. Io mi rifiuterò sempre di considerare *"pull factor"* il salvare vite umane. Noi italiani abbiamo visto anni fa il dramma di centinaia e centinaia di persone morire nel canale di Sicilia. In quel momento abbiamo provato vergogna come Europei. Io sono orgogliosa di un'Europa che salva vite. Mi rifiuto di considerare questo un *pull factor*. Dopodiché la vera risposta è eliminare e ridurre le cause che spingono nella disperazione alle migrazioni

Can Dündar: "Do not leave Turkey alone. Erdogan is not Turkey"

Exiled Turkish journalist debates media freedom and human rights with EESC

Following recent developments in Turkey, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) invited Turkish journalist Can Dündar to its Plenary session on 26th April. The former editor-in-chief of the Turkish newspaper Cumhuriyet, currently living in exile, called on the EU to stand beside Turkey and the Turkish people in support of media freedom, human rights, rule of law and democracy. The EESC debate also assessed recent developments in Turkey and discussed EU-Turkey relations.

EESC President **Georges Dassis** said: *"Your fight is our fight and this appeal for us to defend democracy and freedom is important. I hope it will be heard by our governments, national parliaments and the European Parliament. We will be there to support you."*

"Please do not leave Turkey alone. Turkey represents the largest prison for journalists today", said **Can Dündar**. *"Europe may need Turkey, but if it still attaches a great importance to freedom of thought and press, it should support Turkish people. Europe shouldn't give up its values in the interest of short-term benefits or goals".*

Dündar, who was one of the 5 finalists of the 2016 Shakharov Prize, was arrested in November 2015 after his newspaper reported on Turkey's intelligence service smuggling arms to rebels in Syria. In May 2016, he was sentenced to five years' jail for "revealing state secrets", and survived an assassination attempt that same day. Still facing an arrest warrant in Turkey, he currently lives in exile in Germany.

"Through this debate today, we would like to honour the courage of the 150 journalists remaining in jail, the 2,700 journalists who have been dismissed, and the 170 media organisations who were closed down", remarked EESC Workers' Group President, **Gabriele Bischoff**, welcoming Mr Dündar. *"A German journalist, Deniz Yücel, is also imprisoned – and we urge the Turkish*

authorities to free him. The EU must develop clear criteria for its future relations with Turkey as regards human rights, freedom of speech, freedom of association and rule of law."

EESC Various Interests' Group President, **Luca Jahier**, said *"Turkey is its people, the living force of its society. It is this Turkey that we have to continue working with. We hope to return to a Turkey that is democratic, open to the future, and that respects liberties and the rule of law separation of power – and it is the role of civil society, academia and the media to keep open these avenues of communication and support."*

EESC Vice-President **Gonçalo Lobo Xavier** stated *"we urge Turkey to work with international journalists' organisations and UNESCO, OSCE and the Council of Europe on working with journalists and insuring, in the interest of Turkey, that press freedom is at the heart of its policy"*.

"Even though the situation in Turkey is difficult, I would like to stress that the EESC will have to continue to have regular contacts with Turkish civil society organisations in order to demonstrate to them our support, and convey their concerns to the EU institutions" said **Dilyana Slavova**, President of the EESC's External Relations Section.

During the debate, Dündar recommended that EU politicians defend democracy and rule of law and make it a requisite for investing in Turkey. He advised that during official visits to Turkey, they visit jailed politicians and lawyers in Turkey who are stigmatised and risk to be forgotten. *"Relations with Turkish civil society need to be bottom-up – via local authorities and civil society, as European governments have been taken hostage by their relations with Turkey"*.

EESC relations with Turkish civil society

Since 1995, the EESC hosts the EU-Turkey Joint Consultative Committee (JCC), which has been active in liaising with civil society and pushing for Trade Union rights and Women rights in Turkey. The 35th JCC meeting was held on 5 and 6 December 2016 in Ankara, and the next one is scheduled for 18-19 July 2017 in Brussels.

EESC opinions

The EESC has recently issued opinions on the [role of civil society in Turkey](#) and the [enhancement of EU-Turkey bilateral relations](#), and is expected to adopt an own-initiative opinion on [Turkey's role in the refugee crisis](#).

[Press release – MEPs discuss situation](#)

in Hungary with Prime Minister Orbán

Political group leaders and MEPs gave their views on Hungary's new education law, perceived as targeting the Central European University, the tightening of rules for NGOs and asylum seekers and a government survey entitled "National Consultation – Let's stop Brussels!".

Many MEPs took the view that the new education law is an attack on academic freedom and NGOs are being targeted to suppress critical voices.

Some pointed out that the EU has been passively witnessing a systematic erosion of democracy in Hungary and called for tougher measures. Others defended the Hungarian government's moves by arguing that civil society needs rules and member states have the right to regulate education. Hungary is being attacked for not signing up for open borders and a multicultural ideology, they added.

EU Commission First Vice-President Frans Timmermans said that its legal analysis of the new education law had confirmed its incompatibility with the EU law and announced an infringement procedure. He criticised the Hungarian government survey for making "false allegations" about the EU's intentions.

Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said that accusations that his government wanted to close the CEU were false and portrayed the national consultation as a democratic tool. The law on NGOs follows a US example, he added. "We would like to reform the EU, but Hungary is unquestionably committed to Europe", he said.

Click on the hyperlinks below to view live replays of individual statements.

[Frans Timmermans](#), vice-president of the Commission (part.1)

[Frans Timmermans](#), vice-president of the Commission (part.2)

[Viktor Orbán](#) , Hungarian Prime Minister (part.1)

[Viktor Orbán](#), Hungarian Prime Minister (part.2)

[Manfred Weber](#) (EPP, DE)

[Gianni Pittella](#) (S&D, IT)

[Zdzisław Krasnodebski](#) (ECR, PL)

[Guy Verhofstadt](#) (ADLE, BE)

[Gabriele Zimmer](#) (GUE/NGL, DE)

[Philippe Lamberts](#) (Greens/EFA, BE)

[Nigel Farage](#) (EFDD, UK)

Press release – MEPs advocate reviewing EU – Turkey relations and suspending EU accession talks

Europe is not closing the door to Turkey, but recent developments prompt it to look for alternatives to Turkey's accession to the EU, said MEPs in a debate with Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn on Wednesday.

Opening the debate, European Parliament President Antonio Tajani urged Turkey to respect fundamental rights, which are the basis of Europe. He stressed that "Europe is not an Islamophobic continent and is not closing the door on the Turkish people."

Many MEPs voiced concern at the way Turkey's referendum, which backed expanding presidential powers, was conducted, calling it unfair. They said it is time to reassess EU – Turkey relations and start a new chapter.

Some MEPs could not see Turkey ever becoming a full EU member, while others still hoped that it would be enough to suspend the negotiations, leaving the possibility for Turkey to change its current course.

An expanded customs union, more trade, student exchanges, and cooperation on security and migration, were some of the ideas presented by MEPs as a new way forward. Some also advocated maintaining support for democratic forces in Turkey, as millions of Turks do want to be a part of EU.

Next steps

The European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee is set to start debating the traditional annual resolution on Turkey's progress on 2 May. The [draft resolution](#) for 2016, prepared by rapporteur Kati Piri (S&D, NL), also calls on the EU "to suspend the accession talks with Turkey if the constitutional package is implemented unchanged".

You can catch up with the debate via [Plenary on Demand](#)