

Speech by the President of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani, at the European Council meeting on 9 and 10 March 2017

Brussels

1. My approach to the obligations of my office

I was elected on the basis of a clear pledge: to act as the spokesman for the European Parliament, not its Prime Minister. At European Council meetings, I will set out Parliament's positions, and in so doing give voice to the views of the minority as well.

My program is the European Parliament's program. We need to work effectively to adopt good laws in the interests of all citizens.

I am firmly committed to fair and constructive cooperation between our institutions. Parliament will be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

My priority as President will be to help bring Europe closer to its citizens.

Today, more than ever, we all have a responsibility to play our part, to carry out the roles we have been given, to the very best of our ability. Blaming problems on other institutions or governments is not the way to solve those problems. That calls for political courage and vision.

The widespread dissatisfaction we see today is not so much with the European project itself, but rather with its apparent inability to find answers to the problems facing us. The concerns of ordinary Europeans - unemployment, security, immigration, protection of the environment - must be at the top of our agenda.

A few weeks ago, the European Parliament approved the trade agreement with Canada and the mandate to establish a new emissions quota trading system. These decisions are tangible examples of what a results-oriented Europe can achieve.

2. Items on the European Council agenda

A more competitive Europe

If unemployment, particularly among young people, is to be reduced, we need a more competitive Europe which is attuned to the needs of the real economy. Here again, everyone must play their part. The European institutions must speed up the work of completing the single market; the Member States must implement the reforms needed to foster growth.

The single market is the biggest driver of prosperity for our citizens. But it has not yet fulfilled its potential. Further efforts are needed to create a genuine European market in services, capital and energy. Investing in energy efficiency can create many jobs. There are still barriers hampering the free movement of goods.

We need to establish the digital single market as quickly as possible. If it lacks a European dimension, citizens and consumers will not enjoy the full benefits of the digital revolution. Only a large area without barriers can foster the development of start-ups in a rapidly changing world in which new business models are emerging all the time. We must also encourage European creativity, not least by protecting intellectual property effectively. The European Parliament is doing its bit: only recently we approved the decision to do away with roaming charges in Europe, and we are discussing the proposals on the digital agenda, the energy package and the capital union.

We are determined to speed up progress in these areas.

Manufacturing accounts for 80% of innovation and exports, and indirectly for a large share of the jobs in the services sector as well. For that reason, the main focus of our policies must be strengthening Europe's industrial base.

Our firms are world leaders. Throughout the world, Europe is a byword for quality. This translates into jobs.

We all have an interest, therefore, in continuing to make the case for open markets with conviction.

Today more than ever, Europe has a duty to maintain its course towards an open society and free trade based on compliance with the rules.

The agreement recently concluded with Canada is a good example of an economic and trade partnership which will create jobs and help European SMIs to export. It combines measures to abolish barriers to trade with provisions which will safeguard European quality and high employment, health and safety standards.

Over the next few months we must continue to work in this direction, in particular in the negotiations with Japan, Mexico, Chile and Mercosur.

We must continue to implement trade policy intelligently, strengthening industry and services and taking resolute action to counter all forms of unfair competition.

The European Parliament is committed to completing the negotiations on trade protection instruments quickly.

We are working to secure a political agreement ahead of the summit with China.

After many years of stagnation, the economies of all the Member States have started to grow once again, albeit at widely differing speeds.

Unemployment, in particular among young people, remains high in many parts of Europe. Economic convergence is still inadequate.

In some parts of the Union, economic and social disparities are widening. If we want a more competitive Europe which is capable of safeguarding our social market economy model for future generations as well, we must strengthen our economic governance instruments.

The European Semester must be made more effective and more democratic. The reforms implemented to date seem insufficient to eliminate all the obstacles to growth: high levels of tax on labour and businesses, inefficient public authorities, professional training which is not always tailored to the needs of the economy, a lack of investment in infrastructure and research.

The Member States must take greater responsibility for identifying and actually implementing the reforms required.

In that connection, the European Parliament recently approved three reports highlighting the need to increase the level of involvement of the national parliaments in economic policy-making. I would like to thank the Commission for its recent efforts to do just that.

We must continue to work to attract more investment. The European Parliament supports the increase in the budget for the Commission's Investment Plan and will work to secure its adoption.

Defence

Today more than ever, we must display a greater sense of collective responsibility for guaranteeing the security and defence of ordinary Europeans.

The European Parliament supports the establishment of a European defence industry and market, in order to generate economies of scale and encourage interoperability and joint research. That is the basis for more effective European defence and the more efficient use of resources.

We must increase the level of coordination so that we can work more effectively together, exploiting synergies and avoiding duplication of programs and over-capacity.

Immigration

Immigration is at the top of the list of ordinary Europeans' concerns. We need to implement the decisions which have already been taken.

In Valletta you discussed the external aspects of immigration with a focus on the stabilization of Libya.

The right of asylum is one of the fundamental values underpinning our Union and one which, like solidarity among the Member States, we must protect at all costs. The European Parliament is working to make the asylum system more effective by overhauling the Dublin Regulation.

We must be just as rigorous in taking in people who qualify for asylum as we are in countering illegal immigration.

We cannot leave the management of migration to people traffickers and terrorists. We need decisive political action at EU level to strengthen controls at our borders and, at the same time, to tackle the problem of migration at its roots.

In order to facilitate and speed up returns and reduce migratory pressures, we need robust political, parliamentary, economic and cultural diplomacy. Europe must use all the instruments at its disposal.

If we really want to deal effectively with this phenomenon which is bound up with demographic growth, climate change, terrorism, war and poverty, we need a joint strategy. We must step up our efforts directed towards the countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean and in sub-Saharan Africa, in particular those in the Sahel.

We need more investment, including private investment, and transfers of know-how in the areas of security, infrastructure, clean energy, industry, entrepreneurship, training and administrative capacity-building.

The Commission proposal to set up a European fund for sustainable development in Africa, which Parliament intends to approve before the summer, is a step in the right direction. The same can be said of the Commission

proposal to expand the EU's tasks under the common security and defence policy, on which Parliament has already started work.

More generally, we need a new approach to traditional development policy, in the context of the revision of the Cotonou Agreement.

Parliament is working on the harmonization of return travel documents and on the Smart Borders initiative, which will make it possible to record more quickly and more securely details of the persons crossing the external borders of the Schengen Area.

All these matters are being fast-tracked. I am sure that the Maltese Presidency will work hard to conclude the negotiations currently under way.

Western Balkans

The European Union was a beacon for many countries in the past and must continue to be one for all the countries in the Western Balkans. In some of those countries, there are alarming signs that stability and the democratic process are being undermined.

Here as well, Europe must show leadership, remain the benchmark and demonstrate a high degree of unity. The European Parliament is wholly committed to political and economic cooperation with these countries. Our objective is still that they should join the Union.

European Public Prosecutor's Office

I applaud the work which has been done to establish a European Public Prosecutor's Office.

3. Future of Europe - Anniversary

Today more than ever we can see how important European unity is. Europe needs to be changed not weakened. All the institutions need to work harder to find the answers which ordinary Europeans are looking to us to provide.

This will only be possible if we work together, seeking to understand each other's point of view.

The European Parliament intends to do everything it can to build bridges towards the peoples of Europe and work in the general interest. This approach always brings greater benefits for all the Member States than one based on the lowest common denominator of the sum of national interests.

The only response to populism is to demonstrate by means of practical achievements that we are working together for a Europe which produces results.

We are about to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Rome. That celebration must be more than just a formal ceremony to mark what have been the best 60 years in the history of a free Europe. Europe is a success story when it embodies a dream of progress, prosperity, freedom and peace. I refuse to believe that Europeans have lost the desire to dream. It is up to us, today, to change the image of a distant, ineffective, bureaucratic Europe. We must reignite people's passion for Europe by giving them the feeling once again that they are part of an historic project. It is the greatest legacy that we can bequeath to future generations. In the first meetings I have had with some of you here in Brussels and in Rome, Valletta, Madrid, Berlin and Ljubljana I sensed a determination to move in that direction.

The debate on the future of Europe which was launched by the adoption of the three Parliament reports - Verhofstadt, Bresso/Brok and Berès/Böge - and the presentation of the Commission's White Paper will show just what that determination means in practice.

You can count on me and on the European Parliament.