

Report by President Charles Michel to the European Parliament plenary session

I would like to thank you for your invitation. As you know, strengthening ties between the European Council and European Parliament has always been important to me.

I will speak first about Turkey and our visit to Ankara, before moving on to the other points on the agenda of the March European Council.

The situation with regard to Turkey has been difficult for several years. As an indication of how serious the issue is, leaders have discussed Turkey at 11 meetings since the start of my term of office. But in March we adopted a clear and robust statement: a positive agenda, but phased, proportionate and reversible, and subject to a review in June. That statement paved the way for the meeting in Ankara.

Regarding the protocol incident which occurred, I have publicly expressed my regrets on several occasions. Regrets towards the President of the Commission and towards all those who were offended.

In terms of the facts, the Council's protocol team was not granted access to the meeting room before the meeting. And the Commission did not send its protocol team. The EU delegation in Turkey took part in the preparations. The teams were therefore unable to see in advance how the chairs were arranged. President von der Leyen and I are committed to ensuring that this does not happen again. We have instructed our protocol and diplomatic teams to work closely together on this.

I know that, given the circumstances, many of you think I should have acted differently. I hear that criticism and I take note of it. In that moment, without the hindsight we all now have, I decided not to react further in order not to create an even more serious political incident, which would have destroyed months of diplomatic groundwork. But I am aware of the negative impression the images give, and of the feelings of many women who were offended by the incident.

I would like to reiterate my genuine commitment to supporting women and gender equality. It is an issue I have addressed throughout my political career.

During our discussions with President Erdogan, President von der Leyen and I also shared our serious concerns regarding Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention.

Several of you have written to me, asking me to use this incident to defend the role of women. I am willing to take that outstretched hand and make the most of this dynamic so that we can move forward in a constructive way. For example, you can count on my commitment and my best efforts to try to encourage the Member States and unblock the Directive on improving the gender balance among non-executive directors of companies listed on stock exchanges.

I am willing to look at other files, including the crucial issue of equal pay. The gender pay gap in the EU is more than 14%. It has improved only very slightly over the last decade: this situation is simply not acceptable. I am also open to exploring the idea of a possible Council configuration on gender equality.

Now allow me to address the substance of the meeting in Ankara. The aim of our visit was to bring Turkey back to a more constructive, or at least less negative, path in its relations with the European Union, to diffuse tensions and to ensure a clear focus on human rights.

President von der Leyen and I told President Erdogan that we were prepared to put a positive agenda on the table. But that agenda depended on progress in several areas: in particular human rights, relations with Greece and settlement of the Cyprus problem.

We expressed our deep concerns regarding the rule of law, fundamental rights and women's rights, in particular Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, as well as freedom of expression and the targeting of political parties and the media. Frankly, it is difficult to envisage extensive cooperation with Turkey whilst negative measures continue in these areas.

Exploratory talks between Greece and Turkey have started. Talks on settling the Cyprus problem should also begin this week under the auspices of the United Nations. We called on Turkey to engage in a constructive way and we have also emphasised the importance of the EU's role as an active observer at these talks.

We specified that our cooperation could be based on three pillars:
firstly, economic cooperation: we will carefully assess the possibility of modernising the customs union;
secondly, migration: we underlined the need for Turkey to be engaged on this issue in good faith;
thirdly, we will work on strengthening cooperation on people-to-people contacts and mobility.

We also touched on regional and foreign policy issues: Libya, Syria, Nagorno-Karabakh. We raised the issue of the memorandum of understanding signed by Turkey and Libya on maritime delimitation, and underlined the European Union's clear position. I would like to add that I deliberately chose to visit Turkey as part of a trip to the region which began in Libya on the Sunday and continued in Tunisia before moving on to Turkey.

The heads of state or government will discuss Turkey again in June, when we will be able to take stock of developments.

As you know, we addressed COVID as a matter of priority during our discussions. We focused on three crucial areas:

First, getting our citizens vaccinated as quickly as possible. Some countries raised concerns on vaccine distribution and the imbalances between them. We reaffirmed the principle of sharing vaccines on a pro rata population basis. The question of governance of the steering board was also raised by leaders. We tasked the Committee of Permanent Representatives with addressing the issue in a spirit of solidarity. I am glad that a solution was found the week after the European Council.

Second, we discussed preparations for the lifting of restrictions, and interoperable digital certificates. You will be discussing digital certificates on Wednesday. I hope trilogues will start as soon as possible.

And third, the international dimension. The EU is a major exporter of vaccines around the globe. At the same time, we decided we would continue to strengthen our response to the pandemic through a vaccine-sharing mechanism that complements COVAX.

During our meeting, we had a short information point on Russia. I reported on my visit to Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. We reaffirmed our five guiding principles towards Russia, and agreed to return to the matter at our next European Council meeting in May.

We adopted strong conclusions on digital, the single market, our industrial policy, and the economy.

On digital taxation: we prefer a global solution in the framework of the OECD. But, if necessary, we are ready to move forward on our own.

At our Euro Summit, we adopted a framework to continue our common work on the international role of the euro. We will deepen our work around four main pillars:

building a strong economic base and a sound financial architecture;
working on digital finance and on green finance.

A strong euro will enhance our strategic autonomy while preserving an open economy.

Finally we welcomed President Biden during our session. It was the first time in over ten years we welcomed the President of the United States. We agreed we must join forces to defeat COVID-19 and work closely together on vaccines and on supply chains. On climate, we welcomed America's return to the Paris Agreement. We discussed safeguarding our common values in the digital world. And we acknowledged our wish to address geopolitical challenges together. We want to build on our friendship and forge a new transatlantic mind-set. A robust foundation for our renewed cooperation. As you know, together with President Biden and President von der Leyen we will have an EU-US Summit in mid-June.

I believe the European Union must realise the level of its ambition and of its achievements, especially on the international scene.

We are not as weak as we think or as we say: look at our influence around the world. Look at Georgia, Ukraine or Africa. Look at how we have influenced other strong nations to be more ambitious on climate. China, Brazil, India and the United States are following the European Union's example.

Three years ago, in Sibiu, we were only seven prime ministers to ask for climate neutrality. And now carbon pricing has become a topical debate well beyond the EU's borders.

Look at how we have set global standards for digital. The GDPR is now the global gold standard for privacy. The US is following our example and is ready to work on a digital tax. And just last week the EU was the first in the world to propose binding legislation on artificial intelligence.

We are leading by example. The EU is sitting in the driving seat for renewed multilateralism and for pursuing its strategic autonomy. And we can do so much more.

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