

EPP Group Report

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Tunisia: EPP Group calls on EU to help transition to democracy

By Pedro López

Following the flight of ousted President Ben Ali from Tunisia, the EU should help the country to organise a democratic transition and mobilise all efforts to avoid the destruction of this process.

This was the main message expressed by the EPP Group Coordinator in the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament, José Ignacio Salafranca (ES), during a debate held in the Strasbourg plenary on the current turmoil in Tunisia.

Salafranca also warned the political forces in Tunisia against taking advantage of the power vacuum to adopt extremist political positions. "This will kidnap the transition process. Only in defence of freedom is extremism not a vice", he said. In the EPP Group's view, it is in the European Union's interest to help the democratic process in Tunisia: "It is only through democracy that we can guarantee long-term stability", Salafranca pointed out.

One of the first measures that the European Union could take to assist Tunisia is to be ready to send an electoral observation mission to presidential and parliamentary elections due to be held within the next two months, as announced by the Tunisian Prime Minister.

But the events in Tunisia invite us to reflect on the framework of the Neighbourhood Policy. "We must ask ourselves if helping to maintain the political status quo in some countries around us that are not full democracies contributes to our stability as it seems evident that the downfall of Ben Ali does not represent in itself enough incentive for a democratic transition in Tunisia", Salafranca said.

The Parliament will closely follow the evolution of the situation in Tunisia and will debate and vote on a Resolution during the next plenary in February.

Cross-border Healthcare - making life easier for patients

By Marion Jeanne

Françoise Grossetête's (F) Report on patients' rights as regards cross-border healthcare was adopted by the European Parliament with an overwhelming majority this week. This Directive is a major example of what Europe does to make life easier for its citizens.

The negotiations between Council and Parliament have been tricky, since many Member States had reservations about this proposal for a Directive. An agreement was found nevertheless, thanks to the work of the Belgian Presidency and the willingness of the European Parliament.

"Patients will no longer be left in the dark when taking steps to benefit from healthcare treatment abroad and to get reimbursed by their Member State of origin. This Directive clarifies the rights of patients, which until now have been unclear", said the Rapporteur after the vote.

Citizens will benefit from accessible, clear and precise information thanks to single national contact points. Patients will then have the opportunity to receive healthcare treatment abroad and to get reimbursed by their Member State of origin according to precise, definitive criteria.

Hospital treatments will be authorised under certain conditions in order to preserve the correct management of healthcare systems in the 27 Member States. The Member State of origin may, in some cases, refuse patients' treatment abroad if patient mobility presents a risk for the patient himself or to the population; or if it is determined that the patient can receive the treatment in their country of origin within an acceptable delay in terms of their health. It was also important to establish a safeguard to prevent patients from having to pay in advance for healthcare treatments where possible.

European cooperation will be strengthened in a number of fields, such as rare diseases. Notably, patients will be able to ask for expertise in order to diagnose a disease, and be allowed to resort to and get reimbursement for healthcare treatment abroad on that basis.

Patients will therefore be able to benefit from tangible advantages due to their mobility. Crossing the border to receive healthcare treatment can prove to be both beneficial and necessary.

Alzheimer's - improving sufferers' quality of life

Almost one in 20 people over the age of 65 and one in five over the age of 80 suffer from dementia. It is estimated that more than 8 million Europeans aged between 30 and 99 suffer from neurodegenerative diseases and scientists anticipate that this number could double every 20 years.

Alzheimer's disease represents 50% of these cases. The EPP Group in the European Parliament encourages coordination between Member States and a more effective response geared towards the prevention and treatment of people living with dementia, particularly Alzheimer's, as well as the people around them, such as healthcare professionals, service providers or relatives.

Oana Antonescu (RO) supports the efforts to raise public awareness about dementia in the EU, facilitating the recognition of the early symptoms, setting up measures to strengthen research, and improving access to diagnosis and drugs. With the world population becoming older, diseases like Alzheimer's are a big challenge, also from a financial point of view.

The EPP Group supports the development of action plans aimed at improving the well-being and quality of life of patients suffering from dementia and their families. The EPP Group welcomes the European Commission's concrete proposals to tackle Alzheimer's disease. These include:

- acting early to diagnose dementia and to reduce the risk of dementia in the first place;
- improving research coordination between EU countries;
- sharing of best practices and providing a forum to reflect on rights, autonomy and patient dignity.

Eugen Sandu

Hungarian Presidency: time for a 'Strong Europe'

By Miklós Panyi

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán presented the programme of the first ever Hungarian EU Presidency this week in the Strasbourg plenary. In his speech, he said that 2011 will be an especially challenging year for Europe which should be dealt with through strong leadership via their programme 'Strong Europe'.

"Today, we are faced with an equally serious challenge as the one we faced twenty years ago. We, in the EU, are confronted perhaps with the most difficult year of the last two decades", Orbán highlighted. He recited the fields of global economy, environment, demography and security as the most weakened areas in Europe in current times. He then detailed the Presidency's priorities which reflect on the current complex circumstances and will improve Europe's competitiveness. These are, among others: strong economic governance, eliminating extreme debt, job creation, strengthening energy security, adopting the Roma Strategy and enhancing enlargement.

At the end of his speech, referring to the disagreements on the new Hungarian media law, he called upon the other political parties not to confuse Hungarian domestic politics with its activities and measures during the current Presidency. "If any objectives can be established and verified [by the Commission] we would be happy to amend the law", he said.

Numerous MEPs from the EPP Group, such as Group Chairman Joseph Daul (F), followed PM Orbán in the plenary debate and all welcomed the Hungarian programme and assured the Hungarian Government of their support. European Commission President José Manuel Barroso also welcomed the highly ambitious Hungarian programme and firmly agreed with its name 'Strong Europe'. From the Hungarian Delegation, Ádám Kósa, the only deaf Member of the European Parliament, and Lívía Járóka, the only MEP of Roma origin, commented on the programme, both welcoming its references to minority groups.

Although it was not directly linked to the Presidency, the new Hungarian media law was among the topics of most the speakers on all sides. The opposition expressed sharp critics accusing the government of not respecting basic freedoms, while supporters stressed the importance of waiting for the Commission's evaluation.

Attacks on Christians: EU must defend religious freedom

By Lasse Böhm

Following the recent attacks against Christians in Egypt, Iraq and other countries, the European Parliament strongly condemned these acts of violence in a cross-party Resolution led by the EPP Group, expressing its concern about the situation of Christians in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The Resolution, supported by a broad majority, called on the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs to develop a strategy to enforce the right to freedom of religion in countries outside the EU, and draw up a list of measures against states who knowingly fail to protect religious denominations.

"EU development aid and trade relations should take into account the respect for human rights and freedom of religion in the countries concerned. The EU needs to put the spotlight on violations of human rights and the persecution of Christians, and make sure that payments to third countries as well as diplomatic agreements are dependent on improvements in these areas", said Elmar Brok (D), who drafted the Resolution on behalf of the EPP Group, and Mario Mauro (IT), Head of the Italian Delegation of the EPP Group.

In order to be able to do so, the European Parliament Resolution calls on the European External Action Service to build capacities to monitor restrictions on religious freedom in the world and to integrate a chapter about religious freedoms in the EU's annual human rights report.

"To be able to freely exercise one's religion is a basic human right. The defence of religious freedom is therefore not a preference for a particular religious belief, but the protection of an intrinsic human right, which unfortunately is threatened in many parts of the world. Europe must therefore address the freedom of Christians if it wants to remain true to its own values", Brok and Mauro said.

Belarus - no more room for dialogue

By Joanna Bekker

The European Parliament's political response to the situation in Belarus in the aftermath of the presidential elections of 19 December 2010, reflected in the adopted Resolution, is clear - there is no more room for dialogue with the Belarusian regime, at least until all Belarusian opposition and civil society representatives are released from prison.

The EPP Group strongly believes a double check approach is necessary - sanctions towards the regime and greater openness and financial assistance for society, independent media (including TV Biesat) and NGOs. "We need intelligent sanctions that will not worsen the lives of ordinary Belarusians. However, we must not be afraid to impose them or of suspending Belarus' membership in the Eastern Partnership initiative", said Jacek Protasiewicz (PL), Chairman of the EP Delegation for Relations with Belarus, speaking during the debate.

"We need to replace the carrot and stick policy implemented so far towards the regime, by a stick policy towards the regime and a carrot policy towards society. We should remember that society is our partner, not the regime", underlined Jacek-Saryusz-Wolski (PL) speaking in plenary.

The adopted Resolution, supported widely by all political groups, condemns what has happened in Belarus in the last month, calls on the authorities to release all political prisoners, asks the Member States to impose and extend sanctions to President Lukashenko and his collaborators, and enlists a number of activities that should be undertaken by the international community in order to sufficiently help the Belarus society.

Serbia takes a step closer to Europe

By Lada Jurica

The European Parliament has adopted a Resolution on Serbia's European integration process and has ratified the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the country. According to György Schöpflin (HU), Serbia has finally made up its mind that it genuinely wants a European future. Kinga Gál (HU) emphasised that Parliament's Resolution has a well-balanced approach to minority rights, including those of the Hungarians in Vojvodina.

After a traumatic history, a legacy of wars during the 1990s and the end of the rule of Slobodan Milošević, Serbia has opted for Europe. According to Schöpflin, the decision to do so in light of past turbulences was a considerable achievement and signalled that Serbia had become a factor of stability in the region.

However, two major political problems remain - the arrest and transfer of Ratko Mladić to The Hague and coming to terms with the independence of Kosovo.

But Serbia's European commitment is clear, the tasks faced by the elite and by society are recognised and the technical preparations are going ahead. "If all goes well, Serbia should receive the avis this autumn and candidate status after that. The road to Europe will not be easy, but Europe as a whole will benefit from a stable, democratic Serbia", concluded Schöpflin.

Kinga Gál appreciated that, according to the Copenhagen criteria on minority rights, the Resolution was well balanced. However the MEP pointed out that Serbia still needs to perform better in the implementation of laws on minority protection. Both the Statute of Voivodina and the Law on National Councils are only worth as much as the elements that are implemented in practical, everyday life, including an appropriate financial instrument.