

# MONDAY, 3 SEPTEMBER 2007

IN THE CHAIR: MR PÖTTERING

*President*

*(The sitting was opened at 5 p.m.)*

## 1. Resumption of the session

**President.** – I declare resumed the session adjourned on Thursday, 12 July 2007.

## 2. Statement by the President

**President.** – You all deserved your holiday. You all look well-rested and I hope that you are now looking forward very much to getting back to our work on European matters.

I am afraid that I have to start with some sad news.

Since we last met here, we have learned with deep sadness of the deaths of two great Europeans, Gaston Thorn and Raymond Barre, both eminent men who dedicated themselves to the service of their countries as outstanding Prime Ministers and Members of the European Commission. Gaston Thorn was a Member of the European Parliament for ten years, from 1959 to 1969. From 1969 to 1974, he was Luxembourg's Minister for Foreign Affairs and then became that country's Prime Minister in 1974, holding office until 1979. He served as President of the European Commission from 1981 until 1985. Under his guidance, the European Community negotiated the terms for the accession of Spain and Portugal, initiated the common fisheries policy and reached a solution to the contentious issues surrounding the Community's budgetary resources and its future financing.

Raymond Barre was the Vice-President of the European Commission from 1967 to 1973 and Prime Minister of France from 1976 to 1981. As Commissioner for Economic and Financial Affairs, he presented the initial proposals for the creation of a European economic and monetary union within the framework of the Barre Plan in 1969 and 1970.

Both men worked tirelessly on European integration until the end of their lives, making extremely important and practical contributions in support of this process under what, at that time, were often very difficult conditions.

Last weekend, Altiero Spinelli would have celebrated his 100th birthday. As one of the architects of the present European institutions, Altiero Spinelli was a Member of this Parliament for ten years. I had the great honour of working with him for seven of those ten years until his death in 1986. During his ten years as a Member of the European Parliament, and especially as the Chairman of the Committee on Institutional Affairs, he played a key role in pushing forward an ambitious agenda for institutional reform. His draft Treaty establishing the European Union, which the European Parliament adopted by a substantial majority in 1984, created the basis for many of the important changes introduced by subsequent Treaty reforms, including a substantial expansion of the European Parliament's legislative powers.

During the summer recess, we witnessed a whole series of natural disasters: from the dramatic floods in the United Kingdom to the heat wave in the eastern Mediterranean and the recent tragic fires in Greece. These events have inflicted great suffering on many people in Europe. In Greece, more than 60 people died as a result of the major fires. It is entirely appropriate that this tragedy should be the first important item on our agenda this afternoon, and I am sure that I speak for everyone in this House in expressing our most heartfelt condolences to the victims of these and other tragic events.

Our sympathy also goes out to the relatives of the more than 500 people who died in the earthquake in Peru on 15 August and to the thousands who, since we last met, have lost their lives in the senseless violence in Iraq.

The plight of the countless refugees still dying as they attempt to cross the Mediterranean and the Atlantic by boat in order to reach the European Union also causes us sorrow and concern. It remains incumbent on all of us to find solutions to bring these tragedies to an end.

I would ask you to rise for a minute's silence in remembrance of the dead.

*(The House rose and observed a minute's silence)*

**3. Approval of Minutes of previous sitting: see Minutes**

**4. Documents received: see Minutes**

**5. Membership of Parliament: see Minutes**

**6. Membership of committees and delegations: see Minutes**

**7. Signature of acts adopted under codecision: see Minutes**

**8. Communication of Council common positions: see Minutes**

**9. Texts of agreements forwarded by the Council: see Minutes**

**10. Petitions: see Minutes**

**11. Transfers of appropriations: see Minutes**

**12. Oral questions and written declarations (tabling): see Minutes**

**13. Action taken on Parliament's positions and resolutions: see Minutes**

**14. Order of business: see Minutes**

**15. One-minute speeches on matters of political importance**

**President.** – The next item is the one-minute speeches on matters of political importance pursuant to Rule 144.

**Nickolay Mladenov (PPE-DE).** - (BG) Mr. Chairman, colleagues,

The natural disasters we witnessed in Europe this year come to prove the need for two substantial changes in the way in which we tackle these problems. In the first place, there is a need for the establishment of more flexible mechanisms to assist countries in the process of recovery after natural disasters. Secondly, these problems reveal the need for the establishment of integrated European rapid response forces to supplement the capacity of nations facing such disasters.

This year, my country Bulgaria suffered from both fires and floods. When massive fires had to be extinguished around one of the big cities, Stara Zagora, the government requested help from the Member States of the European Union but could not receive it because their capacity was busy. Instead, it received support from Russia on the basis of a bilateral agreement. That badly affected the image of the European Union in my country. Therefore I am asking all of you to appeal to the European Commission to make a thorough analysis and draft proposals for the establishment of joint European forces to assist the Member States in their response to disasters and accidents. Thank you.

**Ioan Mircea Paşcu (PSE).** - Mr President, international terrorism represents the dark side of globalisation. Terrorists abuse the democratic freedoms granted by our countries, such as free travel, media coverage and citizens' rights, to attain their aims through fear and violence against innocent people.

Addressing this problem calls for an effort to fully uncover and understand the intimate mechanisms of terrorism, including its religious, societal and even civilisational roots. We in the democratic states start with a handicap in this area. While we strive to save lives, terrorists want to cause as many casualties as possible

in the hope of being able to manipulate the emotion generated by the images of carnage shown on our television sets.

We need to distinguish between the suicide bomber and his or her recruiter. Very often, the suicide bomber is not driven by the hate which characterises his or her recruiter, but by the promise of perpetual happiness after an heroic death, which is politically exploited by the recruiter.

Prevention is better than having to react. To that effect, we need to strike the right balance between the immediate and longer-term requirements of the fight against terrorism. We therefore need to strengthen intelligence, police and judicial cooperation between our states while simultaneously addressing the structural causes of terrorism, especially in the countries providing the most recruits for such acts.

**Alexandru-Ioan Morțun (ALDE).** - (RO) Mr President, after tens of years of political imprisonment the members of the Ilașcu group in the Republic of Moldova have recently been invited to the European Parliament and were heard by the Sub-Commission on Human Rights. Adrian Ivanțoc, Tudor Petru Popa and Alexandru Leșko spoke tearfully about the torture they endured in the Transnistrian prisons, and about the repeated abuses and violations of human rights that occurred there. They called on the European Community to take more action, to solve the regional conflict with a view to implementing all international agreements, especially those providing for the retreat of Russian troops from Transnistria. In order to turn these legitimate wishes into reality, the European Parliament should rally and also rely on the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights when it proposes actual measures to support NGOs in Moldova, should encourage and support the publishing of newspapers and magazines in this area and should build a broadcasting network on the right bank of the Nistru in order to ensure that Moldavian national radio and TV channels can be received. Last but not least, there is a desire to radically change how the Transnistrian problem is being negotiated. The European Union, and also Romania, as a member of the Union, must change the status of observers to full member status.

**Andrzej Tomasz Zapalowski (UEN).** - (PL) Mr President, a few months ago the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning xenophobia and burgeoning nationalism in Europe. The treatment meted out in that document to certain countries, including Poland, was unduly harsh and out of all proportion to the scale of the problem.

Of course issues relating to racial hatred must be treated very seriously indeed. That is why I am surprised that the European Commission is not taking decisive action against parties of a fascist nature that are in the ascendant in some countries. There are even countries where representatives of such parties hold elected office at regional level. Hit squads from those parties are abusing foreigners on the streets and making public appeals for borders to be revised.

This is a serious problem mainly affecting a number of countries of the so-called old Union. The countries concerned should have dealt with the problem long since, yet the Community's leaders are pointing the finger at the new Member States even in the case of insignificant incidents.

**Willy Meyer Pleite (GUE/NGL).** - (ES) Mr President, on 12 August there was a collision in the Strait of Gibraltar between the *New Flame* cargo vessel and the *Torm Gertrud* oil tanker. This is the ninth accident in one of the world's busiest shipping lanes, used by over 100 000 vessels per year.

The accident points to the pressing need to create a supervision and monitoring port authority between the Kingdom of Spain, the United Kingdom and Gibraltar. The fact that this kind of shipping control does not exist puts lives in jeopardy and logically constitutes a threat to the local environment.

To date we still do not know, and I feel the European Commission should demand to know, what the sunken cargo ship is carrying: 27 000 tonnes of scrap metal, possibly hazardous, contaminated scrap.

I feel it is most important that Parliament and the European Commission urge the authorities in Spain State, the United Kingdom and Gibraltar to create this shipping supervision and monitoring body.

**Ian Hudghton (Verts/ALE).** - Mr President, I wish to draw attention to an innovation in European marine conservation. On Saturday, Scotland became the first country in Europe to implement a voluntary scheme of real-time closures of fishing grounds, with the aim of safeguarding cod stocks. That scheme, which was developed as a joint initiative between the new Scottish Government and the fishing industry, will hopefully provide a template for future marine conservation projects. I understand that the Scottish Government has engaged with its counterparts in Denmark and Norway with a view to learning from this particular project.

The common fisheries policy has been nothing but a disaster for Scotland to date, and I firmly believe that the future of fisheries management lies not in central control from Brussels but in direct cooperation between fishing nations. The Scottish Government and the industry are to be commended for taking such an innovative approach on this matter. I hope, in the mean time, that when it comes to the December Council their voluntary efforts will be taken into account, recognised and rewarded.

**Urszula Krupa (IND/DEM).** - (PL) Mr President, the Nazi invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 was yet another act of violence perpetrated against my homeland. More than six million Poles perished during the ensuing six years of war. This represented 17% of Poland's population, which amounted to 35 million individuals at the time.

Two weeks later, on 17 September 1939, the Soviet Union also attacked Poland pursuant to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Over 22 000 of Poland's intellectual elite lost their lives, shot in the back of the head by the Soviets who then occupied my homeland for many long years. This explains why millions of my countrymen were so full of hope when we regained our independence. Despite many fine words and Union slogans about equal rights and non-discrimination, however, certain German politicians and sections of the German media are constantly attacking my homeland, the people of Poland, the Government of Poland and the Catholic media, notably *Radio Maryja*. This proves that aggressive anti-Polish sentiment still persists.

On the anniversary of the invasion of Poland and on behalf of the living and the dead, I call for an end to this violence, which could be construed as an attempt to achieve objectives it proved impossible to attain through war.

**President.** – Thank you. Reconciliation always remains an important task in Europe.

**Viorica-Pompilia-Georgeta Moisuc (ITS).** - (RO) Mr President, my intervention concerns the rights of the Romanians in Serbia and Bulgaria. The territory on the right bank of the Danube, in North-Western Serbia and North-Western Bulgaria, including, the area from the Ratan Mountains to the Danube, and from Moravia Valley to Timoc Valley in Serbia, and the Vidin region until Lom in Bulgaria,, is primarily populated by Romanians. They form a minority of over 300 000 people, living in more than 130 small and middle-sized villages and 20 towns. They are not recognized as a national minority, they do not benefit from religious services and education in their mother tongue. Romanian is not taught in their schools. The Romanian language, literature and history are studied under semi-clandestine conditions, in private homes. The sole Romanian church in Mălăinița will soon be demolished. The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia has drawn attention to the desperate situation of the Romanian people living there, and to their right to preserve their national identity. I hereby call upon the European institutions to urgently investigate this situation and to intervene for the Romanian minority's rights in Serbia and Bulgaria to be respected.

**Marian-Jean Marinescu (PPE-DE).** - (RO) Mr President, Article 29 of the Treaty on the European Union defines terrorism as a serious crime. In the Treaty on the European Union, actions whose effects endanger people's lives, which promote violence and aim to intimidate the population qualify as terrorist offences. What we have seen in Budapest with the establishment of the Hungarian Guard can be included within the scope of this definition. On that occasion, the leader of the Hungarian Guard made some fairly shocking declarations, expressing his concerns regarding Slovakia and Romania, two countries with Hungarian communities, that could attack Hungary. I think that such organisations and extremist actions encourage separatist movement within the minorities that have already autonomous trends and such a situation is not in accordance with the proper conduct of an EU Member State. Such organisations should be dissolved and attitudes similar to those expressed by the Hungarian Guard should be forbidden and punished by law. Therefore, I take the liberty of calling on the leaders of the EU institutions to firmly condemn such attitudes and to ask the Agency for Fundamental Rights to draw up a report on the facts and to monitor the situation faced by the minorities living in Hungary.

**Bernard Poignant (PSE).** – (FR) Mr President, in our various countries many dramatic situations bring us back to our European obligations. Such is the case in my country, where a cargo vessel has caused the death of a fisherman. This leads us on to maritime safety, and now the French know where the Republic of the Kiribati Islands is. I would urge you to have a look at the atlas: it is not very well known, but this is a flag of convenience. The European Union must in all urgency get tough on flags of convenience, speed up legislation in the *Erika III* package, invent an '*Erika IV*' package on the social matter of sailors' training and working conditions, and simultaneously arrange better coordination for action by our countries in the International Maritime Organisation.

This is an old issue that rears its head at frequent intervals, but many dramas bring us back to it. I urge you, Commissioner, and the gentleman or lady representing the Council not in attendance, to step up your efforts in this direction.

**Silvia Ciornei (ALDE).** - (RO) Mr President, on 18 October 2007, the European Commission will launch the EU Anti-Trafficking Day. I would like to welcome this initiative which will bring this sensitive and -for the most part- unknown issue to the attention of the European citizens, with around 2 and a half million victims every year. Therefore, I would like to draw the attention once again to the fact that in order to have successful results in the fight against this phenomenon, Member States should coordinate their efforts more efficiently. Currently, national laws do not allow this. Yet Member States have available to them the 2005 European Council Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, which represents the most comprehensive legal instrument for fighting this phenomenon. However, until now, only 18 of the 27 Member States have signed up to this Convention and only 3 Member States have ratified it. That is why, I am taking the liberty in asking the European Commission to request the power to sign the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings on behalf of the European Communities from the Council. Mr President, trafficking in human beings is a serious breach of human rights. We now have to move from words to deeds. It is time to act in order to make it easier to punish traffickers, and to protect victims' rights. These victims are sold and resold, treated as slaves in a modern Europe; a Europe about which we are proud to say is based on respect for human rights.

**Stanisław Jałowiecki (PPE-DE).** - (PL) Mr President, I should like to begin by expressing my sincere condolences to the relatives of all the victims of the natural disasters in Greece and in other countries. My heart bleeds for them. I was myself affected by a disastrous flood 10 years ago, so I am very well aware of what is involved.

Unfortunately, disasters will continue to happen. The establishment of a European Rapid Reaction Force is therefore particularly necessary. I strongly support the creation of such a force at the earliest opportunity. It is strange that we express practically no opposition to the establishment of a whole series of European agencies, even though there are now several dozen bureaucratic entities of that type. When peoples' lives are at stake, however, we always express countless reservations. It is time to overcome the latter and set up European units modelled on the UN's so-called blue berets but wearing perhaps red or white ones instead. These units would be tasked with protecting us against the continuing threatening onslaughts of nature rather than against human beings.

**Csaba Sándor Tabajdi (PSE).** - (HU) Life has rapidly proven the truth of the professionally-based arguments with which I, along with my colleagues in the European Parliament, have fought against the European Commission and its decision to end the maize intervention.

The Commission was concerned that the intervention system could not be maintained because of the surplus in maize, though market trends did not indicate this. The Commission purchased at EUR 101, and it is now selling for twice that and so is profiteering considerably from the entire maize intervention, while drought has struck Europe and livestock farmers have been short of grain. This raises questions about the trustworthiness of the Union: there is still available stock, but multinational speculators are buying up supplies while honest livestock farmers are not able to get sufficient fodder for their animals. This undermines trust in the European Commission and the European Union.

**Cristian Silviu Buşoi (ALDE).** - (RO) Mr President, dear colleagues, the Romanian Government decided that 25 November 2007 would be the date for European Parliament elections. On that day we will assist in what is an historical moment, one could say. Romanian citizens will be able to directly vote for MEPs. That day will be a test of our seriousness and of our commitments to being an EU Member State. In Romania, the election campaign will be a chance to hold discussions on interesting issues concerning the European Union: the future of the EU, the Constitutional Treaty, the next enlargement, internal reform, the efficiency of the European institutions, free access to the labour market. These should be the issues debated during the election campaign and not politicised issues, that are not included in the citizen's day-to-day agenda: anticipated elections, motion of non-confidence, unfounded political attacks. In order to improve the quality of the debates during the pre-election period and the election campaign, I hereby call upon experienced MEPs, irrespective of their political views, to visit Romania during the period before the elections to include on the agenda for the European Parliament campaign those European issues that must be debated in a consistent and serious manner both in Romania and in the other European countries.

**Hélène Flautre (Verts/ALE).** – (FR) Mr President, I wish to inform you of the trial currently being held in Agrigente, Sicily of seven Tunisian fishermen accused of aiding illegal immigration, even though on 8 August they rescued 44 people, including 11 women, two of whom were pregnant, and two children. They are now accused of aiding illegal immigration, and this is happening on European soil. I feel that the crime of solidarity that is now taking place, as this trial demonstrates, ought to be condemned by Parliament. A delegation is also due to travel to Agrigente this Friday, and I can only encourage the Members and their leader, you, Mr President, to voice their support for these seven Tunisian fishermen.

**Kathy Sinnott (IND/DEM).** - Mr President, this week the Freedom Drivers return to Parliament. The Freedom Drivers are people with disabilities and high dependency needs, who want to enjoy the same freedom of movement that everyone else enjoys and that Europe represents. They come to ask for the kind of legislation that will allow them this freedom of movement.

They will explain the obstacles they face. Many of these obstacles are of our making and removing them should be a challenge for this Parliament, for the nations and the people we represent. My challenge to you, Commissioner, is that this is their third year visiting and little has changed. Yes, we have improved air passenger rights, but we have little else to say to them. When can we expect the long-awaited disability directive that will put real legislative weight behind equality for people with disabilities?

**Anna Záborská (PPE-DE).** - (SK) Prior to joining the Union, some people in Central Europe thought that membership of the Union would solve all our problems. That has not happened. Although the Union was created to safeguard peace in Europe, I must highlight the radicalisation of the situation in Hungary. Members of the so-called 'Hungarian Guard' took the oath a few days ago. Its leaders talk about a common border for all Hungarians and its Memorandum of Association talks about compulsory weapons training. They wear uniforms and enjoy the support of a former government minister. Slovak-Hungarian relations have deteriorated recently.

A few months ago the Hungarian Prime Minister refused to meet his Slovak counterpart and there is renewed talk about the revision of the outcome of World War II. I call on the Hungarian Government to take action against the paramilitary guard and dissolve it. We Slovaks have outlawed a similar radical organisation in our country. There is no place for anything of this kind in the Europe of the 21st century. Reconciliation and mutual apology are in our common interest: Slovak and Hungarian Catholic bishops led by example in Ostrihom last year. That is what saying 'no' to extremism looks like in practice.

**Evgeni Kirilov (PSE).** - Mr President, my colleagues and I recently witnessed a very strange phenomenon at Terminal 1B of Frankfurt Airport. Passengers leaving for Sofia on a Bulgaria Air flight had to go through two consecutive security checks that were completely identical.

After enquiring of the terminal officials why passengers had to stand twice in a long queue to undergo the same security check procedures, I received the absurd explanation that Frankfurt Airport was overloaded and second checks were required because of extra passengers arriving from elsewhere.

A reliable source later informed me that these double checks are applied on certain days of the week at Terminal 1B for flights to the following EU countries: Bulgaria, Poland and Romania.

Mr President, I would expect the Commission to respond to this practice because it has to do not just with air passengers' rights but also with the human rights of European citizens.

**Maria Petre (PPE-DE).** - (RO) In the Accession Treaty to the European Union, Romania undertook to organise elections for the European Parliament by the end of this year. The Romanian Government unfortunately postponed the initial date for the European Parliament elections, that is 13 May, until 25 November. Analysts say that the main reason for this postponement was fear of certain political parties, including the governing parties, concerning the outcome of these elections. An old Romanian proverb says "you can run but you cannot hide". The Romanian Government is afraid not only of these elections but also, unfortunately, is afraid of women. There is no woman in the Government and this is something particular in the EU Member States. Among the current 35 Romanian MEPs, 12 are women. After the November elections, the political parties should be able to change the gender ratio and they should designate at least 18 women in the European Parliament. I would like to assure you that the Democrat Party -as a member of the European Popular Party- will act in this way. Therefore, I would like to remind the Romanian Prime Minister that Romania is part of the European Union as of 1 January and that 2007 is the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All.

**Lidia Joanna Geringer de Oedenberg (PSE).** - (PL) Mr President, last Friday Polish trade union members from the Gdansk shipyard demonstrated in front of the European Commission's headquarters in Brussels.

In July the European Commission issued an ultimatum, giving Poland one month in which to submit plans to reduce the shipyard's production capacity. The Commission is calling for the closure of two of the three slipways at Gdansk, if the shipyard is not to be required to return the State aid it has received from the Government of Poland since 1 May 2004. The EU Commissioners claim that the Commission's intention is to modernise the shipyard, not close it. In fact, such a drastic reduction of production capacity with the closure of two out of the three slipways would make the facility unprofitable. In practical terms, it would result in the loss of a great many jobs and ultimately in the collapse of the shipyard.

The Gdańsk shipyard is not, however, simply an ordinary shipbuilding facility employing a great many workers. It is also one of the most important symbols of the contemporary history of Poland and of our united Europe, namely the birthplace of the *Solidarity* movement.

The European Parliament ought to urge the European Commission to seek an appropriate solution to this situation, one that would give priority to the good of the facility and of its workers. In our role as the voice of European society we should express our solidarity with the shipyard's workers, and insist on a solution ensuring both the shipyard's stability and respect for this symbol of the history of contemporary Europe.

**Marios Matsakis (ALDE).** - Mr President, Amnesty International is an organisation with impeccable credentials, which, through its many years of hard work, has helped greatly in the fight against human rights abuses worldwide and has earned the respect of all those who care about justice, freedom and democracy. But Amnesty International has also, not unexpectedly, created a lot of enemies. One such enemy exists in Turkey. Many of Amnesty International's reports concern Turkey and this has upset the army-controlled 'deep state' establishment in that country.

That establishment recently reacted aggressively once again. As you are probably well aware, it has issued, through the local authorities in Constantinople, a decision on so-called 'illegal fundraising' and subsequently frozen Amnesty International's bank accounts in Turkey. This is clearly an attempt to cripple Amnesty International in that country.

I urge you to make strong representations to the Government of Turkey to make it clear that Parliament will not accept the aforementioned attack on Amnesty International, and that such attacks hinder significantly Turkey's progress towards EU accession.

**Gerard Batten (IND/DEM).** - Mr President, how much does membership of the European Union cost Britain? Last week I published my second annual report on that very subject. By calculating the direct and indirect costs, I established that EU membership costs Britain at least GBP 60.1 billion per annum gross, or GBP 50.6 billion per annum net. That equates to over GBP 1 000 gross, or GBP 843 net, for every man, woman and child in the UK. Put another way, that is GBP 114 000 per minute gross or GBP 96 000 per minute net. The majority of the British people realise that this is a colossal waste of money.

It is no wonder that UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown is refusing to give the British people a referendum on the new reform treaty. If he thinks that the EU is value for money, he should accept my challenge and commission an independent cost-benefit analysis to prove it. That would be the prudent thing to do.

**Milan Gaľa (PPE-DE).** - (SK) The prefab blocks of flats in the V4 countries and in Bulgaria and Romania were built 40 years ago and are in need of renovation. It is not possible to get money from the Structural Funds because of the *de minimis* rule. Under this condition, without the approval of the European Commission, a single beneficiary is not allowed to receive from the State a grant exceeding EUR 200 000 (approximately 6.8 million Slovak crowns) over a three-year period. The prefab estates are managed by only a few groups, housing cooperatives or administrators. The average cost of renovation is 580 000 Slovak crowns for one prefab house and approximately EUR 17 000 for one flat. The new Member States would benefit if the Commission did not apply the *de minimis* rule in certain instances.

At the end of June the ministers of these countries agreed to set up a group of experts, which will be involved in talks with the Commission. Its task will be to harmonise the legislation with the conditions for receiving EU financing for the renovation of prefab housing under the Structural Funds. Prefab houses are the main urban renovation problem in the new EU Member States. Since they are in a state of serious disrepair, I am asking the European Commission and you, my fellow Members, to support this initiative.

**Glyn Ford (PSE).** - Mr President, I should like to draw the attention of the House to the tragic fire at the Penhallow Hotel on the seafront of Newquay, Cornwall, in my constituency.

Three people died in the fire: one because he jumped from a high window, and two – one of whom is rumoured to have been disabled – died in their rooms. These people would probably not have died if they had lived elsewhere in the European Union. In Hungary, for example, a hotel of this height would have been required to have had sprinklers fitted. In the last four years, 60 people in Europe have died in fires in hotels where no sprinklers were fitted; no one in Europe has died in a fire in a hotel where sprinklers have been fitted.

I ask the Commission to take this fact into account and to bring forward proposals in terms of fire safety legislation for hotels across the Union.

**Marco Cappato (ALDE).** - (IT) Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, during the last parliamentary term our Radical Party colleague, Maurizio Turco, asked the European Commission some questions about the tax privileges of the Catholic Church and companies revolving around it in Italy and Spain.

The Commission's answers to the request for information reached Italy just a couple of weeks ago. In Spain the questions led to VAT legislation being amended in such a way as to do away with those advantages and privileges.

In Italy, on the other hand, a series of absolutely unseemly reactions ensued: some people, including former minister Maurizio Gasparri, went so far as to speak of *Bin Laden-style actions*, while others have talked about anticlerical racism. Even the Vice-President of the European Parliament, Mr Mauro, has referred to the anti-Catholic and antisocial arm of the Radical Party Minister, Mrs Bonino.

In my opinion, this House should be pleased if for once questions to the European Commission have had such a tangible effect, and I believe that we should continue our support for this initiative.

**Philip Claeys (ITS).** - (NL) Mr President, you may know that a peaceful demonstration against the Islamisation of Europe was due to have taken place on 11 September in Brussels. Citizens from several Member States wanted to organise this action and the demonstration aimed first and foremost to appeal to the European institutions in general and to Parliament in particular. That is why the appointed place was Luxemburgplein right next to the entrance to Parliament.

Now, however, the socialist Mayor of Brussels has banned this demonstration outright. This makes a mockery of freedom of expression and the right of free assembly. This is not so much an internal matter for Brussels or Belgium, but a matter that concerns us as Parliament and it would therefore be proper for you to register a protest against the ban on this demonstration in Brussels. It cannot be that we in Europe promote basic democratic rights all over the world through the European institutions, while in Brussels, in the heart of the European Union, these same basic rights are being trodden underfoot.

**David Sumberg (PPE-DE).** - Mr President, I rise with great regret because I have considerable admiration and respect for you. However, I want to protest at the fact that last week, in the Parliament building in Brussels, there was a conference allowed, which was ostensibly dedicated to peace in the Middle East but which in fact transpired to be a one-sided, prejudiced, biased, unrepresentative attack on the State of Israel. I am afraid it was in sharp contrast to what is actually happening in the region, where very patient negotiations between the Prime Minister of Israel and the President of the Palestinian Authority are moving forward under American auspices.

This conference, as you know, was not a conference of the European Parliament. It took place in the Parliament building and it allowed the organisers to gain credit and our approval for what they said. You were thanked personally for facilitating that conference. I think we should reflect carefully before we do that again. The European Parliament building is not a meeting house for every group that wants to have a protest at this or that problem throughout the world. It certainly should not be allowed to be hijacked by those extremists who will never recognise that peace in the Middle East, as elsewhere, will only come by negotiation and not by the bullet and the bomb.

**President.** - Mr Sumberg, since you addressed the President of Parliament, I should like first to thank you for your appreciative comments. However, I must make it clear that there are things that are not part of the competence of the President. This was a decision of the Conference of Presidents and, therefore, I had to carry it out.



The conference was organised by an institution of the United Nations. Therefore, it was not *any* institution but rather an institution of the UN. I explained this in a formal letter to the Speaker of the Knesset and I have also explained it to the Ambassador. As far as the President of the European Parliament is concerned, I did not take part in it and I did not receive any of the speakers. The conference was held in the European Parliament, but the European Parliament was not responsible for it. I think you should take that into consideration.

(DE) I must now remind you, however, that the President, who always tries to accommodate the Members of this House, is now invoking Rule 144. This states that the President may call Members for a period of not more than thirty minutes. I have always assumed that this was the minimum, which is why I have always been generous in my interpretation of this provision. It means that Mr Sumberg, to my regret, is now the last Member to be called. However, I hope that my answer to him has been informative and has explained the situation regarding this event more fully.

That concludes the item.

## **16. Forest fires in Greece, their consequences and conclusions to be drawn for prevention and preparedness measures (debate)**

**President.** – The next item is the statement by the Commission on forest fires in Greece, their consequences and conclusions to be drawn for prevention and preparedness measures.

**Vladimír Špidla**, *Member of the Commission.* – (FR) Mr President, I first wish to apologise for the absence of my colleague Stravros Dimas, who wished to take part in this debate but has been prevented from doing so due to a recent serious eye operation.

Ladies and gentlemen, the European Commission wishes to express its deepest regret following the devastation caused by the forest fires in Greece. Our thoughts are with the victims and their families. President Barroso travelled to Greece this weekend to size up the situation for himself. Commissioner Hübner also visited the scene in order to assess to what extent European funds can make a contribution to reconstruction work there, and will report on her visit at tomorrow's College meeting. Commissioner Dimas, who was in Greece during the initial fires, witnessed the deployment of international assistance for the Greek fire-fighters, and also reported to the College in order to inform the entire Commission about the aid provided and to appeal for all available instruments to be mobilised for rapid reconstruction.

This has been both a human tragedy and an ecological disaster. The fires have destroyed human lives, homes and the economic framework of an entire nation. The extent of the damage is considerable: at least 1 80 000 hectares of land have been burned, and 1 30 towns and villages devastated. In the areas most seriously affected, such as the Peloponnese and central and eastern Greece, regional economies were badly hit. All Europeans were moved by footage of the fires, and Europe was prompted to react and take measures when Greece called for assistance.

The Commission's Monitoring and Information Centre was able to coordinate the assistance offered by 14 Member States, and the international community provided additional fire-fighting assistance, thereby playing a major role in preventing the fires from spreading. With the assistance of the Commission, Greece's European partners were able to supply specialist airborne assistance with 13 Canadair water bombers and 20 helicopters – this information will be updated on Monday – and fire-fighting units on the ground, vehicles and other facilities. Particularly valuable assistance was provided by Norway, Switzerland, Serbia, Russia and Israel. The mission was the largest ever European civil protection operation carried out for a Member State. Aid was rapid and efficient, a remarkable example of European solidarity.

The damage caused by the fires in Greece was on an exceptional scale, and occurred within a general context of escalation of this type of disaster. Between July and August this year the Commission received a dozen international assistance calls: from Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Bulgaria, Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. As a general rule the response by Member States was generous and immediate. The increase in the number of calls for assistance, however, brought about a situation which eventually affected the operational limitations of airborne fire-fighting operations. The European Union ought to give first priority to the possibility of mobilising additional capacity, and equip itself with extra fire-fighting facilities by approaching either non-EU countries or the private sector.

The Greek Government has estimated the damage at approximately EUR 4 billion, or around 2% of Greek GDP. The government is drawing up a coherent action plan to redress the situation, and has informed the Commission that it intends to seek assistance from available EU programmes.

The terrible environmental damage caused in Greece is now compounded by the risk of torrential rain running into rivers to hit a weakened ecosystem, and soil erosion causing landslides and water pollution. A large number of protected zones have been destroyed, and the Commission is now examining how the available funds, and the Life+ Fund in particular, could be mobilised to help restore the habitats destroyed.

The Commissioners have discussed these issues in detail and the Commission has undertaken to take all possible measures to help the Greek Government to cope with the social, environmental and economic consequences of the fires. One possible instrument available to meet the needs of the Greek people is a reprogramming of the Structural Funds for the regions and programmes directly affected.

Moreover, the Solidarity Fund may be mobilised on the basis of a request submitted by the Greek authorities. Within this context, the cooperation of Parliament and the Council will be essential to reduce as far as possible the length of the process for the adoption of an amending budget proposed by the Commission with a view to mobilising this Fund.

In relation to the support envisaged by the 2006 operational programmes concerned, as soon as a request for modification is made by the Greek authorities the Commission will examine it with maximum flexibility within the context of the existing regulatory provisions. Any available credits will be diverted towards meeting the immediate needs of the people and regions affected by the crisis. A fast-track procedure will be used by the Commission to ensure a rapid decision.

For the period 2007-2013, the Commission will adopt new programmes as planned in October following the request by the Greek authorities. The programmes may be adopted at a later date depending on the needs identified and the regions and sectors concerned, on the basis of an overall plan presented by the Greek authorities. With respect to the European Social Fund, we must ask the Greek authorities to include a substantial 'human resources' section in the ongoing action plan. The plan must cover all areas: employment, inclusion and health, education and training, and public administration reform.

Climate change may bring drier winters and hotter summers, thereby creating an ideal context for fires. There is now an increasing risk of forest fires, and Europe's response to this tragedy must also take account of the need to reduce the impact of future fires. Forest management is largely the responsibility of the Member States. This is understandable since the national governments are in a better position to administer their own territory, invest in fire prevention measures and plan the responses of the emergency services.

There are also many options whereby the EU may provide back-up for national responses in this area. The Commission intends to draw up a communication on forest fires, and will be examining a number of practical measures that could improve fire prevention and the rebuilding of economies and ecosystems.

Even though the EU response in terms of civil protection was impressive, the Commission feels that it is time to enhance its capacity in this area. This is an aspect it has been considering since 2006, and in fact President Barroso had already asked Michel Barnier to draw up a report on the matter. We will carefully examine the recommendations of the Barnier Report when the proposals are submitted.

It is encouraging to see that Parliament has always backed ambitious development of European capacity in terms of civil protection. Nevertheless, to enable new measures to be adopted, the unanimous support of the Member States must be forthcoming, and this has frequently proved difficult.

In 2006 the Commission proposed using Community funds from the Civil Protection Financial Instrument to provide extra civil protection facilities such as airborne fire-fighting units for large-scale fires. That is point 9 of that day's resolution almost word for word. Regrettably a number of Member States do not share this attitude, and the scheme cannot be implemented. As a result, the Commission urges the Member States to adopt a more ambitious approach when future proposals are submitted to them in this area.

**IN THE CHAIR: MARIO MAURO***Vice-President*

**Ioannis Varvitsiotis**, *on behalf of the PPE-DE Group.* – (EL) Mr President, Commissioner Špidla has described in detail the major disaster suffered by my country. The President of the European Commission, Mr Barroso, and Commissioner Hübner have visited Greece and the other regions affected by the disaster.

On behalf of all Greeks, I should like to take this opportunity to thank the European Union, the Member States and other countries for immediately sending specially trained firemen and air support, thereby providing my country with vital assistance in fighting the catastrophic fires.

I should also like to point out that similar catastrophic fires (although not on the scale suffered in Greece) have afflicted all the southern European countries that have experienced similar conditions.

Our primary concern now is to look ahead to the next stage, which is already in progress. The first economic support measures for victims are already proving effective. Within a few days, most of those entitled to money to meet their immediate needs and to replace their household belongings have received it. Many homeless people have access to temporary accommodation in mobile homes.

After the conclusion of an agreement between the Greek Government and the European Commission, affected farmers and stockbreeders (the latter, I hasten to add, having lost more than 73 000 head of cattle in the fires) are receiving advance payments to compensate for the loss of their crops, livestock capital and equipment.

I should also like to inform the Commissioner that what he has mentioned is already being done: a study and a draft reconstruction plan for all fire-stricken areas are already in progress. The plan aims rapidly and effectively to cover the immediate human and economic needs of the victims, and also to repair the environmental damage as quickly as possible.

A special part of the plan concerns landscape regeneration at the Olympia archaeological site, which, together with the ancient stadium, museum and other buildings, has been saved through the superhuman efforts of the fire-fighters.

We must acknowledge that the Community Civil Protection Mechanism has granted Greece the single largest amount of assistance it has given out since it was set up in 2001. This assistance has shown that the principles of cooperation and solidarity are at the very heart of the European Union.

With the resolution on which we will be voting tomorrow, our aim is for the European Commission to rapidly mobilise the EU Solidarity Fund and secure all the envisaged financial resources to combat the medium- and long-term consequences.

Secondly, a special rapid-response mechanism should be set up for major natural disasters; in fact some preliminary work has already been carried out in this area. We also believe – Mr Špidla mentioned this, but please allow me to highlight this point – that the Commission should consider the creation of an independent supplementary force consisting of private fire-fighting aircraft or of European countries which do not face a serious fire risk during the summer months. This support force could be located in high-risk countries and be ready for action from the summer of 2008.

I am sure that the EU will stand alongside my country and show in practice that solidarity is the basic principle governing relations between us.

To conclude, I should like to thank you once again for all the support you have hitherto given.

(Applause)

**Martin Schulz**, *on behalf of the PSE Group.* – (DE) Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, I had the opportunity to see the disaster and its impacts for myself in Greece at the weekend. My colleagues and I travelled to some of the affected areas, and I must say that I have never seen such a tragedy in my life. There are people who, as a result of these fires, lost everything they owned, their homes and possessions, in a matter of minutes. I spoke to people who had run for their lives, quite literally with only the clothes on their backs. The situation is critical. Many people's livelihoods are at risk, and they need help in the short term.

Commissioner Špidla is thus quite right when he says that we need swift aid and we need unbureaucratic aid. Speaking on behalf of my Group, when I say that we need swift and unbureaucratic aid, this does not

mean – as some Commission officials think – in two or three months' time. No, the aid must be provided now, straight away and directly. People do not need help in two months' time; they need it now. That is why we are asking for resources to be made available directly from the Solidarity Fund, and if any money is left over in the Structural Funds or other budgets, this should be made available as quickly as possible too.

This is not our first debate about disasters. Time and again over the last ten years, we have sat here and discussed what to do. This applies not only to Greece; it also applies to the people in the flooded areas of Great Britain, who were similarly affected this summer, or people who are affected by earthquakes, and indeed any disaster area.

The following point is important: a centralist approach is of no help when we are trying to mitigate the effects of a disaster at local level. If there are fires around Athens, we need an effective local fire service, not a Disasters Commissioner in Brussels. That is the key point: disaster management must be organised on a decentralised basis. The governments of the European Union must therefore establish their own infrastructures in their own countries, based on their own local conditions and within their own jurisdiction. This infrastructure is needed to take swift and effective action at local level when floods or fires occur.

The European Union must utilise the opportunities at its disposal in order to ensure effective coordination. There are governments who want to start by doing everything themselves – even though they have missed every opportunity that has presented itself over the last ten years to develop the infrastructure – and then call for others' assistance far too late, out of misplaced embarrassment or misplaced ambition.

Let us be clear about one thing then: asking for international assistance, ladies and gentlemen in government, is not an admission of failure. On the contrary, it shows a sense of responsibility and demonstrates an effective management approach. Governments need to respond in this way much more quickly. We then need to develop the coordination mechanisms that are essential to enable us to take effective action.

As politicians, we must all be clear on one point: people do not like the State. Their experience of the State is its role as a regulatory power or tax authority, and we are all well aware that this is only of peripheral interest to citizens. There is one thing which interests citizens when it comes to the State and central government, however, and that is knowing that the State is there to help people in their hour of need. If the State is not there to help when it is urgently needed, and if it does not take action when the police are needed or the fire service is needed, citizens never forget. That should be borne in mind by everyone in a position of responsibility in every country!

What are we actually here to do? Our task is to create the parameters to cushion the fundamental risks facing people in their lives. This must take place at local level. I must reiterate that point. In the places I visited, there is no volunteer fire service. In my country, in the town where I was mayor, we had a volunteer fire service consisting of men and women who give up their free time to protect others from fire. In the places I visited in Greece, this does not exist.

It would be an act of solidarity, for example, if countries who do have this type of service could work together with the affected communities, e.g. in Greece, and think about setting up this type of scheme, with the European Union providing assistance, funding and equipment to enable these structures to be established. That should be one of the lessons we learn from these experiences.

Let me make one final comment that I think is very important: I believe that in a situation such as the one facing the people of Greece today, it is very important for them to feel that they are not alone. That is why I felt it was so important for us, as the Socialist Group in the European Parliament, to send out a message to the people there. Let us say to them: 'All of us – across party lines – know what you are going through'. In this situation, there are no ideological differences. There is no such thing as Christian Democratic or Socialist fire protection! What there is, however, is solidarity with people in need.

I have one further comment: there will always be people in need – whether as a result of flooding or fire – unless we understand that it is not just about criminal elements. Yes, I think that arsonists who want to seize a piece of land by destroying the natural environment are nothing but primitive criminals. They do exist. Nonetheless, much of what we have experienced in recent years is a consequence of climate change, and we will have to become acclimatised to much more than what we are experiencing now. It is not enough to tackle the consequences as they occur. We must also address the causes. That is why a new climate policy course will also play a key role in helping us to deal more effectively with what we have witnessed in Greece and elsewhere.

*(Applause)*

**Vittorio Prodi**, *on behalf of the ALDE Group*. – (IT) Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, I am grateful to Mr Špidla for being here today and making his statement. I should like to begin by expressing my solidarity with the Greek people in particular, but also with those in other countries and regions, such as Sicily and southern Italy, who have suffered similar disasters. I would also pay tribute to the self-sacrifice of the fire-fighters and volunteers and, of course, express sympathy for the victims and their families.

I should like to take up the last part of what Mr Schulz said about the importance of preventive measures. These are a key priority, in my opinion, especially in view of climate change, and I hope we can all convince ourselves that this is a reality and not just a slogan. It basically results in a worsening of extreme events, which is why we are witnessing heavier rainfall and longer periods of drought. This is a totally new challenge for our countries.

There is a need for land maintenance geared to practical steps to combat such phenomena, especially forest fires. The risk of forest fires must be lessened by thinning trees, clearing away anything that could help to propagate a fire and thereby trying to reduce the fire load and the speed at which the flames can spread.

Maintenance is therefore essential, and this must also include watercourses, in case of flooding, so as to increase water retention times. Here we simply need to examine the plethora of proposals made in the Barnier Report calling for a Community force to tackle natural disasters.

In conclusion, all the indications are that the civil defence sector is one where the EU needs a capacity to act, because some disasters are on a scale too big for individual Member States to tackle.

**Carl Schlyter**, *on behalf of the Verts/ALE Group*. – (SV) Mr President, first of all, our thoughts are with the families who have lost members, homes and possessions. Disaster relief must be set in motion extremely quickly.

Society too has lost valuable forests and valuable habitats. It is important that the long-term aid is granted in a context of sustainable development so that we do not invest money only for it to be burnt up again.

We talk about natural disasters but increasingly it is anthropogenic disasters that are occurring. We are changing the climate, the result of which is both extreme drought and extreme rainfall. In some cases the protection of our forests is weak. In some cases we are cutting back the civil defence which saves us from fires. If this is to be sustainable in the long term, work on climate change is needed, both legislation and sound protection of habitats.

I would hope that one condition for European support for construction is reforestation and that money is not used cynically to exploit forest fires to introduce construction of new tourist areas or other changes to land-use.

My Green colleagues in Greece have also asked me – unfortunately we do not have any Green MEPs from Greece – to say that we want to stop amendments to Article 24 of the Greek constitution which weaken the protection of forests. Right now forests need even more protection.

I do not want to criticise or defend the government today. An election campaign is in progress and some seek to criticise and some seek to defend the government. But right now we must help Greece and all the other countries affected – we will accept criticism and analysis when the disaster has been dealt with.

**Dimitrios Papadimoulis**, *on behalf of the GUE/NGL Group*. – (EL) Mr President, Commissioner, my country, Greece, is facing a tragedy. This summer, 75 people lost their lives. About 300 000 hectares of forest were burnt down; we are facing a huge ecological and economic disaster.

The government was caught unawares. It tried to blame this tragedy on an invisible enemy and ‘asymmetrical threats’, implying internal or external terrorist activity. In reality, we are paying for the sins of the present and previous governments. Greece is the only country to have neither a forest register nor a land register. An attempt is being made in Greece to reduce the level of forest protection by revising Article 24 of the Constitution. It is a country of 2 million unauthorised buildings, many in forest areas; villas can easily be built on burnt land and later connected to electricity and water thanks to vote-winning amendments made by governments.

This must change. Unfortunately, no adequate action has been taken to prevent this tragedy. Although the dry, rainless winter and then the heat waves were harbingers of serious fires, inadequate protection was provided. When disaster struck, there was insufficient coordination, and even now, tens of millions of euros

approved by the Cohesion Fund for forest protection remain unused. A total of EUR 33 million has been approved since 2000, but to this day, not a single euro has been used.

Greece, a Member State, must do more. But we, as the European Union and the European Parliament, must also do more for our common European forest heritage.

But enough idle talk, Mr Špidla. 'Let us examine the Barnier proposals': this is hot air, for you have kept these proposals filed away a very long time. You ordered them; you must implement and promote them. You must allocate more money from the Solidarity Fund and Rural Development Fund to Greece and to the other affected countries immediately and without unnecessary red tape. Finally, a fund should be set up for the protection of European forests and the prevention of fires. Just as you did with the floods, you should examine the possibility of a directive on protection against fire risks.

Furthermore, allow me to make a request on behalf of my group. We need more European involvement to protect forests and the environment. Instead of helping the Americans with rapid-response forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, we should set up a European rapid-response force to deal with natural disasters.

Abstract discussion on the risk of climate change is not enough. We, the European Union, must do more about it, and this means common policies, more money from the Common Funds, and stricter control of Member States when they contravene European environmental legislation.

**Jens-Peter Bonde**, *on behalf of the IND/DEM Group*. – Mr President, I address the House on behalf of Georgios Karatzaferis, a Greek Member from my group. He decided to take care of matters in Greece, where 63 citizens have died, 120 villages and small towns have been damaged and millions of trees have been burnt. The GNP loss may be calculated as 2%. It is a disaster, and Greece needs all possible support from the other Member States and the European Institutions.

It seems that EU funds that had been foreseen for the prevention of such disasters have not been used in the proper way. I therefore ask the Commission to establish a full investigation into what happened to the Community funds set aside for mapping land and preventing fires. Who is guilty? Who are those responsible? The families of the 63 Greek citizens who died need an answer; so do we, because we represent taxpayers.

**Gerardo Galeote (PPE-DE)**. – (ES) Mr President, in recent years we have made a sad tradition of the September part-session in Strasbourg as a discussion of natural disasters. There can be no doubt this is an exceptional time in terms of material damage and lives lost, especially after the terrible fires in Greece, but also in other European regions.

First and foremost, we must declare our solidarity with the Greek authorities, with the Greek people as a whole, but most particularly with the families of those who died, who do not always receive the support they deserve.

European citizens, however, are entitled to demand a little more of their institutions: flexible application of the European Solidarity Fund, certainly, as Commissioner Špidla has explained, which has not always been the case, but also some specific decisions.

We must therefore ask the Council what else has to happen before it dawns on it that work is needed to reform an obsolete fund. I feel I must remind the House that the European Commission proposal and amendments by the European Parliament were submitted to it over a year ago, and so my group wishes to ask the Portuguese Presidency to seriously consider calling an extraordinary meeting of the Council to this end.

On another point, although still in relation to the passive attitude of the Council, my group wishes to ask the European Commission to submit specific Community proposals concerning civil protection, along the lines of the Barnier Report.

Mr President, my group has played an active role in the negotiations on a joint resolution, and we support it unreservedly. I am sure that no one will exploit this debate now to meddle in the Greek election campaign because I am sure that we all agree there is nothing more despicable than attempting to extract political gain from human misfortune.

**Stavros Lambrinidis (PSE)**. – (EL) Mr President, today we mourn 65 people who died in the flames of the uncontrolled fires in Greece. We have witnessed the frightful destruction, in a single week, of more than 12% of Greece's total forest area, which is Europe's forest heritage.

At a time of great disaster, those in power should feel not only a sense of grief, but also a sense of responsibility. Of course, responsibility for the fires does not lie with this House, but as MEPs, we have a responsibility to ensure that Europe releases aid immediately, without bureaucratic obstacles, for the regeneration of the stricken areas. We also have a responsibility to draw all the necessary conclusions from the problems involved in preventing and controlling these fires, so that Greece and other EU Member States never experience such a tragedy again.

We PASOK MEPs would like to thank all our colleagues in various political parties who have telephoned and sent messages of support to Greek citizens. We would like to thank Martin Schulz, who immediately visited our country and who, together with Giorgos Papandreou, took steps to communicate the situation and to secure European assistance. In addition, we would like to thank all the European governments that have sent help, and also the Commission for its coordinating role.

Commissioner, I welcome the commitments you have made today, as requested both by the Socialists and by other political groups. The Solidarity Fund must finally be reformed so that it can provide real and immediate assistance. I particularly applaud the fact that the Commission is looking favourably on the proposal to release funds from the Third Community Support Framework. In the midst of such a tragedy, let us keep a close eye on the money for the victims: it is in danger of being lost through incompetent handling.

Lastly, I totally agree that a rapid-response team should be set up, not to replace the responsibilities of national governments, but to assist them in coping with terrible disasters.

Hope may grow out of disaster, but in order for this to happen, the following requirements must be met:

- firstly, the burnt areas must be transformed into global models of sustainable, dynamic development, with no environmental throwbacks;
- secondly, there must be mass reforestation;
- thirdly, there must be no more discussion of declassification of forest land, because this simply plays into the hands of anyone inclined to commit arson;
- fourthly, illegal building on burnt land should be strictly prohibited;
- fifthly, the long-awaited creation in Greece itself of an independent Environment Ministry should be put into effect.

What conclusions can we draw? This tragedy was not, unfortunately, inevitable. The Greek Government itself had foreseen it in its recent report to the Commission; it acknowledged a dangerous lack of coordination between ministries and the absence of prevention plans. Yet Greece, as the report itself emphasises, had seen a spectacular improvement in the effectiveness of forest protection between 2001 and 2004. Nor was the number of simultaneous outbreaks of fire unprecedented. In 2000 there was a similar number of outbreaks but the outcome was completely different.

The Greek tragedy of 2007 reminds us that there will always be fires, just as there will always be arsonists. The key requirement, then, is that there should also be strict policies on the prevention and suppression of fires. We should examine Greece's problems, not in order to condemn, but to prevent similar disasters in the future. For the Europe of 2007, 65 deaths are unacceptable.

*(Applause)*

**Marios Matsakis (ALDE).** - Mr President, the recent forest fires in Greece brought devastation to the communities affected. Dozens of human lives were lost, hundreds of individuals were injured, thousands of animals were killed, whole villages were burned to the ground and thousands of acres of forests were annihilated. Our condolences and sympathy go to the people of Greece.

For almost 10 days we watched in horror as the fires destroyed life, property and the environment in Greece, and our minds returned to similar catastrophes in Portugal, Italy, Spain and elsewhere in Europe in previous years.

The EU has a duty to ensure that proper compensation measures are implemented swiftly. It also has a duty to look critically at the reasons why these fires had such a catastrophic effect, to analyse what went wrong in terms of prevention and fire-fighting effectiveness and to draw conclusions that might guide us in the future.

Reports from Greece point towards possible gross failings by successive central governments and local authorities to establish proper measures to prevent and fight forest fires. It seems that forests were left without adequate anti-fire zones, without functioning emergency water points and reservoirs, without proper plans for fire-fighting or for the orderly evacuation of villages, without up-to-date fire-fighting equipment and without, in some cases, modern training for fire-fighters.

What happened to EU central monitoring as regards the implementation of forest fire prevention policy? Was the Commission not aware of the apparent poor state of affairs in Greece, and what measures, if any, were taken to correct the situation? Those questions need to be answered urgently and clearly.

However, there is another aspect that should worry us, which is the fact that, according to the Greek Government, there is strong evidence that many fires were caused by organised arsonists.

The fires in Greece have demonstrated the ever-increasing threat of yet another form of terrorism: arson terrorism. It is a form of terrorism that is far more difficult to deal with, because arson terrorists do not have to go through sophisticated security checks, but simply have to go for a drive in the countryside. They do not need to use complicated explosive devices: they just need a matchbox. Therefore, it is high time that we start acting decisively and collectively on ways to counter this new, very catastrophic, form of terrorism in Europe.

In conclusion, it is very important to mention once again our gratitude to all those who fought and risked their lives in the mountains of Evia and the Peloponnese in fighting the catastrophic fires while, at the same time, politicians in Athens were fighting each other on TV shows.

**Elisabeth Schroedter (Verts/ALE).** - (DE) Mr President, I would like to express my heartfelt sympathy to all those who are grieving for family and friends. My thoughts are with those who have lost their homes and possessions. They need our solidarity.

The Greek Government was forced to admit that legislative loopholes and policy failure were partly the cause of the devastating fires. In an era of climate change, a rejection of regional policy can have such devastating consequences for the natural environment. This situation now needs to change, including in Greece. In the reconstruction effort, one priority must be to preserve and restore the natural landscape in order to make the affected regions habitable again and give the people there a new basis for life and thus a future. Land speculation in every form must be rejected. It cannot be permitted, and certainly not with the EU's money!

I would also caution the Commission against amending the Structural Fund regulations at the expense of sustainability and the partnership principle which are enshrined in it. At this time, that would be the wrong response to the devastating effects of the forest fires in Greece.

**Georgios Toussas (GUE/NGL).** - (EL) Mr President, this summer's catastrophic fires and floods in Greece as well as in Italy, Portugal, Great Britain and other EU countries, are not a bolt from the blue. Such unprecedented disasters highlight the need to uncover the true causes, to identify those responsible and to halt this ongoing crime against humanity.

We wish to point out the following: by means of a series of reactionary laws and measures, the governments of the Member States have opened the way to the commercialisation of forests and land and, in general, of anything that may be counted as a social good. The fires that claimed 75 of our fellow human beings and more than 250 000 hectares of forest, and caused enormous losses to thousands of ordinary households, are an unprecedented and heinous political, economic and ecological crime against the people of our country.

We gave a timely warning of the grievous consequences, and we have, alas, been proved most tragically right. Let me bring to your attention the findings of the 1993 Greek Parliament inter-party committee, which were unanimously approved by an all-party vote. These findings highlight the uncertain status of ownership, which encourages speculation and illegal occupation of forest land, especially around towns and in coastal areas. The findings also point to a lack of investment in forestry. It was proposed that a single body should be set up to deal with forest protection and the creation of a forest register.

What came of all this? Absolutely nothing.

The joint resolution by the European parliamentary groups on the Greek forest fires, their consequences and the conclusions to be drawn in terms of preventive measures and early warning overlook the true causes and the anti-popular policy of the European Union and the governments of the Member States. A complete lack of foresight is evident.



This extremely dangerous, anti-popular policy strengthens the hand of arsonists and rewards land-grabbers. It damages the environment, causing serious climate change with devastating consequences for mankind. As long as this anti-popular policy, fuelled by increased capital profits, is allowed to continue, arson will go on destroying forests and land. There will be further erosion of workers' rights, and people's rights in general – at work, in education, in health, culture, sport and the environment.

Even now, monopoly groups in the tourist sector are preparing to feast among the ashes on the charred remains of our fire-ravaged country. We believe that at the very least the following must be guaranteed for Greece: no change in land use; immediate general compensation for agricultural produce and damaged agricultural capital; the rehousing of all rural residents at the State's expense, through government agencies.

Also of great importance are the immediate implementation of flood protection projects and other basic prevention infrastructures to forestall further tragedies caused by flooding, and the implementation of measures for immediate protection of the environment and historic sites; the compilation of a forest register; the creation of a single body to supervise and protect forests; and the repeal of the anti-forest laws.

**Antonios Trakatellis (PPE-DE).** – (EL) Mr President, the huge numbers of fires that have ravaged Greece, many of which were caused by arson, in conjunction with high temperatures, prolonged drought and strong winds, have resulted in the loss of lives, destruction of houses and crops, and the loss of thousands of livestock. Fires have destroyed large areas of very beautiful forest, causing an unprecedented ecological disaster.

One of the key principles on which the European Union is founded is that of solidarity. Solidarity has been pledged by many Member States, the Commission and other countries, and Greece is grateful to those who have taken swift action against a natural disaster arising from conditions beyond anything we could have imagined.

However, if we want a quick and coordinated show of solidarity, and an effective one at that, we need to set up a Community mechanism for civil protection against natural disasters, especially when their severity completely exceeds all the capacity of local and national protection bodies.

Amongst other things, the joint resolution proposes restructuring and new, flexible rules for the European Solidarity Fund, coordination of preventive action, and also effective help in combating natural disasters. There is strong support for the establishment of a special European civil protection force to be mobilised in such situations, and always, of course, as a supplement to national action, in accordance with the Barnier proposal.

I should like to believe that a Community mechanism will be set up soon and that the Solidarity Fund will prove to be more effective in the management of disasters and disaster victims. We must not remain inactive again, and the European Union must not wait for the inevitable occurrence of another disaster in a Member State before returning to this question.

Now is the time to act decisively; we must cast aside any small-minded, petty political approach to the issue of natural disasters and civil protection.

**Dagmar Roth-Behrendt (PSE).** – (DE) Mr President, we all feel compassion for those who have lost relatives or friends, but also for those who have lost much of what is important to them in their lives on a very personal level. Yes, we feel sympathy, and yes, it is the European Union's task to show solidarity. That is our fundamental principle, and we want to apply it in this instance too, and yes, in this way, we also want to fulfil our responsibility, which we owe to every one of our fellow countries in the European Union.

If we are expected to take on responsibility, however, then we can expect some responsibility in return. We must ask ourselves: could this have been avoided? I am looking in the direction of my fellow Members who have spoken, longstanding Members of this House who have already adopted numerous laws and action programmes. There are good grounds for saying, yes, it could have been avoided. Nine years have passed since the European Parliament adopted the Action Programme for Civil Protection, and what is the Programme about, Mr Trakatellis? You were involved in its development, as were many others. The Programme consists of providing assistance promptly, but it is also about providing training and organising information events so that people at local level are taught how to react and get help quickly. That should, perhaps, have been possible in this instance too, but probably not everyone is proficient enough yet.

What about the 'Forest Focus' scheme? Is forest management actually being taken seriously? In those countries of the European Union which are always hot in summer – in other words, all of Southern Europe – are fire lanes envisaged at all? Or is that not lucrative enough? These are all things which we need to think about. If

we are willing to take on the responsibility that we owe, then we have the right to demand responsibility as well.

What about waste policy? We have frequently been told that there are Member States which do not take it very seriously. We have been told time and again by the European Commission that there are countries which are not complying with the current legislation. Of course, that means that a thoughtlessly discarded cigarette end can instantly cause a fire. Yes, we want to show solidarity and provide assistance. However, what is this reaction force about? I have a question for everyone here today who is calling for a European reaction force and perhaps even a European fire service. Let me ask them this: how many million people in 27 countries are these supposed to serve? Almost 500 million? These Members are either charmingly naive, straight out of a fairy tale, or they are populist: one or the other.

We should not delude the people out there into believing that the European Union in Brussels – at the Commission or here in this House – could possibly provide enough fire fighters or rescue workers to intervene for us when disasters occur. We need communication structures, and we must call up helicopters from Germany, Finland and the Czech Republic when they are needed, the very same day. After all, there is an early warning system for certain events in the food sector. There, the deadline is 12 hours. I believe we would want to achieve a faster response time than 12 hours there too. I believe we should be honest to the people out there and say, yes, we can give money, and yes, we can set up communication structures. We can try to help, but you need to take responsibility at local level as well, wherever you are, be it Germany, Northern Europe, Southern Europe or anywhere else.

As dreadful as this situation is at the moment, and as much as we feel compassion and must show solidarity, by the day after tomorrow, we must have identified what needs to change.

**Kyriacos Triantaphyllidis (GUE/NGL).** – (EL) Mr President, the citizens of southern Europe who have suffered from the catastrophic fires have had a very difficult time. You were all well aware of the drama unfolding in Greece, where many lives were lost and huge areas of forest were burnt.

As well as economic consequences, this disaster has had human and environmental implications. We should ask ourselves what will happen to all those who lost their homes, work and land. The Solidarity Fund provides financial aid, but what will be done in social terms to reintegrate the victims?

Moreover, what will happen to the environment? As the first rains will not be slow in coming, further disasters threaten in the middle of winter.

These are the questions we are putting to the Commission, and we must insist, as we did in a similar resolution last year, on the establishment of a European civil protection authority.

**Nikolaos Vakalis (PPE-DE).** – (EL) Mr President, the Greek Government is using all its resources in its struggle against a catastrophe that has struck Greece on a Biblical scale. However, the scale of the disaster greatly exceeds the country's capabilities, as Mr Barroso and Mr Schultz have had the opportunity to find out.

At times such as these, European solidarity becomes truly meaningful. International public opinion is watching and assessing how the European family handles the grave misfortune suffered by one of its members.

I call on Mr Barroso in his absence to make full use of all the resources made available to him by his constitutional status. These are the steps which must be taken immediately, and I mean 'immediately':

- flexible activation of the European Solidarity Fund;
- implementation of Article 100(2) of the Treaty, which provides for additional Community funding in the event of natural disasters;
- participation by the Commission and the European Environment Agency in the drafting of a strategic plan for regenerating the fire-stricken areas;
- adaptation of the Third and Fourth Community Support Framework programmes to repair the damage;
- derogation from the Community rules on agricultural and stock-rearing quotas, state aid, and tax exemptions.

To conclude, we are grateful for the help we have received from the Member States in recent days. It was truly invaluable. However, I do not think it eliminates the need to set up a European civil protection force, as proposed by Mr Sarkozy and Mr Karamanlis.

**Edite Estrela (PSE).** - (PT) Mr President, we all regret what has happened in Greece and the United Kingdom. We stand as one with the victims and hope that situations such as these will not reoccur. Unfortunately, as highlighted by the leader of my group, every year at this time the European Parliament adopts a resolution regretting the natural disasters which have occurred during the parliamentary break and proposing measures which are slow to be taken.

We must progress from words to actions so that this situation is not repeated every year, as is currently happening, with ever greater violence and increasing numbers of victims. All these events lead us to believe that the risks are increasing due to climate change and global warming. Various documents exist which suggest solutions – reference has already been made today to the Barnier report and other documents presented by Parliament and the Commission – not only to improve the effectiveness of the civil protection mechanism at European level, but also to improve resources at national level.

As for the oft-mentioned costs, it must be stressed that, when tragedy occurs, this must be tackled and the property destroyed must be rebuilt, which all costs money. It is clearly more costly to cure than to prevent. Not one of the resolutions adopted by Parliament provides for the creation of maps identifying the areas at risk of fire which must be taken into account in terms of planning and development.

Various penalties must also be introduced, such as not allowing building in burnt areas for 10 or 15 years. The Member States do have the necessary ability. I would remind you that in 2003 and 2005 Portugal also had to tackle devastating fires and fortunately has this year been able to help Greece by sending aircraft to fight the fires there. We must therefore increase coordination at European level and improve the mechanisms at national level.

It would be desirable for the Commission to present a directive on fires, as it has done on flooding.

I must end by wishing Commissioner Dimas a speedy recovery.

**Antonis Samaras (PPE-DE).** – (EL) Mr President, today I have returned from the disaster-stricken Peloponnese. I went to visit my birthplace, Messinia, which has been severely stricken by the worst forest fires in a century. It was not just a fire or a single front. Hundreds of fires broke out simultaneously, everywhere, throughout the day and night, and in all directions.

I saw villages burning, forests and crops consumed by flames: the elderly preferred to burn in their homes rather than abandon them, and firemen heroically sacrificed their lives in the line of duty. A total of 65 people died like martyrs, most of them struggling to save their homes and villages. More than 250 000 hectares were burnt down. Tens of thousands of residents were left homeless and the whole population is in shock. On behalf of these people, I beg you for assistance and solidarity. Give them the hope that will allow them to stand on their own two feet again.

I would like to thank the European Parliament and the Commission, which have accepted a set of important proposals from the Greek Government. I would like to thank you personally and on behalf of the Committee on Budgets, of which I am a member. Tomorrow I shall submit further relevant proposals and amendments.

The Europe we are building signifies both solidarity and self-confidence. Our stricken fellow human beings now need the solidarity and self-confidence that the European Union can offer them.

We are thus strengthening Europe itself, its cohesion and the faith of the European peoples in their own unity.

**Richard Corbett (PSE).** - Mr President, most of the speakers in this debate have understandably addressed the fires in Greece, the magnitude of which, and given their freshness in our memories, is of a scale that even now we find it difficult to comprehend. But let us not forget that this debate – and certainly the resolution we are adopting tomorrow – also addresses other natural disasters that have occurred over the summer period. We all know that their causes are, in the long run, partly linked.

I draw attention in particular to the floods that affected many parts of England, including my own constituency of Yorkshire and the Humber. I would urge the Commission and all those involved in processing the requests that have now been made for assistance from the European Union budget – and for the solidarity that our

Union can display – to make sure that in all these cases those funds are mobilised as rapidly as possible without undue bureaucratic impediment. As long as the decision is taken quickly and people know that the money is on its way, it is possible to plan even before the money actually arrives. It is also very important, symbolically and politically, to make this gesture of solidarity with all the regions that have suffered this summer. As new events crowd upon our agenda and these events begin to fade in the minds of those who have not directly suffered, it is important to keep these issues very high on the agenda and to process what needs to be processed as rapidly as possible.

**Ioannis Kasoulides (PPE-DE).** – (EL) Mr President, scientists have predicted that within a matter of decades the Mediterranean will turn into desert. The environmental disaster that the forest fires have inflicted on Greece, and the fires in other Mediterranean countries, are enough to convince me that this prediction will be realised if global warming and extreme weather phenomena continue.

This threat to the European Union should be seen as no less serious than terrorism, illegal immigration, organised crime, etc. We in the European Union must therefore act jointly to confront it.

I welcome Mr Špidla's announcement that the Commission's communication is being drafted. I hope that the Commission will engage the most competent and specialised personnel on matters of forest protection and forest fire control in order to improve forest fire-fighting techniques.

However, I believe that the European Union should also encourage research into the development of aerial fire-fighting resources capable of operating nocturnally. How absurd that military aircraft should be able to operate at night, whereas aerial fire-fighting resources used against such a serious direct threat to the whole of Europe should not.

A further issue is the Natura 2000 programme, of which our forests are part. We should rationally scrutinise this programme, which prohibits the creation of fire belts and access paths for fire-fighting vehicles. The fact of the matter is that we are losing forests in a bid to save trees. Let us re-examine this matter.

Lastly, I believe that these studies, which are to be carried out across Europe, should lay even greater emphasis on reforestation and environmental restoration in the wake of such ecological disasters.

**Donata Gottardi (PSE).** - (IT) Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, the forest fires have affected several European Union countries, sadly, and have even caused loss of life. Italy, too, has once again been hit hard this year. Unfortunately this is nothing new; it is a growing phenomenon and, above all, one that cannot be treated as an emergency year after year.

Quite frankly, if our proposals and demands are to be meaningful and effective, we must begin by pointing out that in a large number of cases these are not tragic accidents but amount to downright criminal acts: crimes committed against the environment, people, society as a whole and its future, perpetrated for speculative reasons. These crimes must be dealt with rapidly, effectively and severely, in a dissuasive and well-planned fashion.

What role can the European Union play alongside the Member States in responding to these disasters and criminal acts? What tools can it make available? It is a good idea to set up an EU task force providing rapid help with rescue operations and sending resources and assistance, but we must take a broader approach going to the very root of the problem.

We must combat criminality and its perverse system of speculative gain by instituting legislative coordination among the Member States with regard to land management and the intended use of areas subject to fire and destruction. Time constraints must be laid down to act as a bar to illegal construction in farming and animal-rearing areas. Resources must be invested in helping local communities by establishing a common reporting network. That is how to put prevention before law enforcement.

**Rolf Berend (PPE-DE).** - (DE) Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, it has been made clear several times in today's debate that the recent natural disasters in Member States of the EU, and not only in Greece, have shown that besides the measures which must be taken at national level, there is an urgent need for better crisis response mechanisms for the European Union as a whole.

As the rapporteur for the Solidarity Fund, I am mystified as to why the Council has so far dissented from debating the revised version of the 2002 solidarity instrument, which was adopted one and a half years ago by the Commission and European Parliament. This new revised version is a more flexible and straightforward instrument for the provision of assistance: if it is not mobilised now under the Portuguese Presidency, in the

wake of these recent disasters, when will it be mobilised? Europe's citizens are quite rightly asking themselves: why is the EU not capable of acting more swiftly? How much is the much-vaunted solidarity among Member States worth? The answer to that question is determined by crisis situations like this one, in my view.

The version of the Solidarity Fund adopted by the European Parliament in 2006 is a strong and flexible instrument which serves the interests of the EU, and its deployment will enable those living in eligible areas to benefit from effective assistance and support based on solidarity. This fund is not only a mechanism for restoring normality and functionality, infrastructure and economic and social life; it also – and this is important for the EU – sends out a clear political signal from the EU to citizens who find themselves in an acute crisis.

It is not about endowing the fund with more money. That is not a contentious issue; a nominal budget line of one billion euros should be maintained. In light of recent events, however, I appeal to the Council – and the Portuguese Presidency in particular – to make this revised solidarity instrument's entry into force a priority.

**Manuel Medina Ortega (PSE).** – (ES) Mr President, I wish to express solidarity with the Greek people after this summer's disaster and most especially my condolences to the families of those who have been lost.

As has been said on many occasions, natural disasters are not exclusive to Greece. In Spain this summer, in fact, we had several large fires in Valencia and the Canary Islands in particular. Fortunately the state facilities worked well, the fires were put out in good time, and the State institutions are now dealing with compensation for those affected.

I agree with my colleague Mr Galeote, and I am delighted with his rather tardy conversion, in that this kind of debate cannot be used to level attacks at a specific government. The remarks made here by the Socialist Members have been proper at all times and aimed at expressing solidarity with Greece, not using the situation for political gain. I trust the People's Party will feel able to maintain this attitude in future debates.

I believe in any case that Dagmar Roth-Behrendt has expressed things very well indeed: basic jurisdiction still falls to the Member States, but action may be taken at EU level through the Solidarity Fund. The Commissioner, Mrs Roth-Behrendt and other speakers have singled out delays in the development of the European Solidarity Fund.

I hope that Portugal, a country particularly prone to this kind of disaster, will use its presidency to further the development of the Solidarity Fund so that we may all work together in the future should there be any repetition of such disasters.

**Manolis Mavrommatis (PPE-DE).** – (EL) Mr President, we experienced unprecedented conditions in Greece this summer, and it is sad that so great a disaster should strike at human level. However, today I should like to pay special attention to the threat posed to archaeological sites by natural disasters. Natural disasters, especially this summer's forest fires in Greece, have endangered monuments of major importance to European cultural heritage.

It was agonising to watch the salvage of the Ancient Olympia museum and the archaeological site of the first Olympic Games. Owing to the weather, the fire could not be contained before it had reached the archaeological site. Despite all efforts, the vegetation of the ancient forest on the Kronius Hill was entirely destroyed.

Ancient Olympia is part of the world's cultural heritage. This was the birthplace of the Olympic Games, the most important games in Ancient Greece. As an institution held in honour of Zeus, the Games shone throughout the land in antiquity, and today their light reaches all parts of the globe. Apart from the sporting competitions themselves, cultural activities used to, and still do, play a key part in the event.

Ancient Olympia is the cradle of civilisation. I am therefore giving it a special mention in the resolution. Finally, in this context, allow me to request that resources be earmarked especially for such cases, to ensure that monuments and sites of European cultural heritage are protected against disaster in future and are restored if damaged by fire.

**Evangelia Tzampazi (PSE).** – (EL) Mr President, we are talking about an unprecedented disaster, the loss of human lives, and an economic and environmental disaster. This has been brought about by climate change, drought and high temperatures, as well as a lack of prevention and planning, and especially a lack of coordinated action.

We must take immediate, concerted action to support the victims. Reforestation and restoration of the protected areas must begin immediately. We must also prevent the illegal conversion of land into building sites.

We can achieve this through a 'European reflex', provided we mobilise Community funds without bureaucratic delay; adopt and enforce strict environmental legislation to protect forests and ecosystems; establish an independent European rapid-response team; and implement a European strategy to combat the impact of climate change.

However, we should also highlight the needs of the more vulnerable sections of the population, such as children, the elderly and the disabled.

I should like to thank Commissioner Špidla for reminding us that we should incorporate anti-exclusion measures into Greece's plan of action.

**Marian-Jean Marinescu (PPE-DE).** - (RO) Mr President, Europe experienced a tragedy with the natural disaster in Greece this summer: loss of human lives and thousands of hectares of forests destroyed. This will, of course, have an extremely negative impact environmentally and economically. The European Union was involved in providing human and material / operational assistance and I hope that the experience acquired will contribute to the future of European civil protection. Reality shows that creating a permanent European rapid reaction force is necessary. This should include reaction teams depending on the various forms of natural disasters and organised around regional centres in order to reduce the reaction time. We also have to be sure that a mechanism is in place for making amounts available from the Solidarity Fund. Beside the devastating fires this summer, Eastern Europe, especially Romania, faced an extreme drought and over recent years, terrible floods have also affected several countries. In 2005, Romania faced the most serious floods of the last 20 years and they affected all parts of the country. Romania received financial assistance from the European Union for the projects in the affected regions but the monies were released late compared to the moment when they would have been the most effective. This summer, the abnormally high temperatures in Romania caused deaths, hundreds of people fainted, the Danube ran half dry while, last year, it flooded tens of thousands hectares of land, 10 districts were declared disaster areas and, for the first time, a red alert was declared. It is obvious that the Member States should take a joint approach to the issue of climate change. The Commission on Climate Change should draw some clear conclusions as soon as possible on the causes and the necessary measures to be taken in order to eliminate these causes.

**Paulo Casaca (PSE).** - (PT) Mr President, I want to start by adding my own words of support for the victims of these disasters, from the Canary Islands in the west to Greece and Bulgaria in the east. As others have done, I also want to commend the work of the civil protection services and in particular the fire-fighters in tackling these disasters. I especially want to welcome the statement made by Commissioner Dimas on 31 July in which he stressed the importance of the report by former Commissioner Barnier and its implementation so that Europe can be properly equipped with a civil protection mechanism capable of providing the response that has been lacking.

While it is true that coordination exists, we cannot forget the limits of this coordination: for example, the fact that the various appeals made by Bulgaria in July went unanswered.

The road forward seems very clear to me: the Commission must use the contents of this report to develop its own proposal and we in Parliament, and naturally also the Council, should duly consider and follow up these proposals, which are so important for the future of European civil protection.

**James Elles (PPE-DE).** - Mr President, it is very clear in the motion for a resolution that we have had a Europe of excessive weather conditions, whether we consider the heat or the floods. We have heard a great deal. Obviously I, alongside my other colleagues, express my deepest sympathy for those who have suffered from the fires in Greece. Equally there are those, as Mr Corbett mentioned, who have suffered from floods, which happens to be the case in my constituency. I am surprised the Commissioner did not raise this. After all, we are talking about natural catastrophes and that also includes floods.

We have had amongst the wettest months of June and July on record, in my country. As a result, the Association of British Insurers reckons damages could be up to EUR 5 billion. Ten lives have been lost, countless homes have been destroyed, countless businesses dislocated and infrastructure has been destroyed. Therefore, it would be extremely important that floods are also included in any action which the Commission wishes to propose.

Commissioner, local people are asking questions such as: can the EU give grants which might be matched by national funding to prevent further flooding by building flood defences? Secondly, should the EU review its directive which prevents the spoil from dredging rivers and streams being left on the banks of these rivers? When we look at the estimates in the future, no one can doubt that these conditions will probably get worse. Climatologists expect the national rainfall average to increase by something like 20%, which can fall in extreme torrential downpours when you get a month's rain within a day.

In this particular circumstance, it would be very satisfying for those who might be listening to the debates in my constituency, Mr Corbett's constituency or across the UK, that you can assure them that the floods will be included, as we stated in paragraph 2 of the motion for a resolution from our group, and that the aid will be given as soon and as expeditiously as possible. As general rapporteur of the 2007 budget, I can assure you that I will be keeping a very close eye to make sure that the funds are properly and efficiently spent.

**Fernand Le Rachinel**, *on behalf of the ITS Group*. – (FR) Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, first and foremost please allow me, on behalf of the ITS Group, to express my condolences and support for the families of the victims and for the Greek people as a whole.

Sixty-three people dead, others disappeared, villages destroyed, 200 000 hectares burned, as my colleagues have already mentioned, tens of thousands of heads of cattle burned, with all the consequences this entails for the national economy, and local economies in particular, as yet unassessed: this is the sad result of the forest fires that have ravaged Greece since the end of August.

The European Union, as usual, will be taking out its chequebook to assist with the rebuilding work and, as usual, it is using a tragic situation to propose an extension of its powers by creating a permanent European civil protection body. This, however, would have contributed nothing to the solidarity of the European countries that sent helicopters, water bomber units and fire-fighters to assist their Greek colleagues, as they did two years ago in Portugal, and as they will do in years to come whenever a Member State requires their assistance.

As on every occasion the European Union is concealing its own responsibilities. Forest fire prevention policy has no autonomous financing and finds itself henceforth floundering around in the Life programme, which focuses on training, communication and statistical monitoring of fires in the small element on this issue.

The Greeks are angry and they have every right to be, because the scale of this disaster is obviously the result of a number of human malfunctions: neglected undergrowth, poorly trained fire-fighters, insufficient facilities, no coordination of operations, inadequate town planning policies, calls for assistance arriving too late and, in particular, no prevention facilities. This is all the more staggering in the case of a Mediterranean country where fires and drought are common occurrences, and which was going through its third heat wave since the beginning of the year. There was no realisation that, in due consideration of the climate characteristics, there ought to have been a genuine air force of water bombers.

It is not, however, only Mr Karamanlis's Government that must be singled out here, even if its wait-and-see attitude during the initial days was particularly scandalous: only 1 000 fire-fighters, only 440 soldiers. Certain parties must be singled out, and the blame also lies with its socialist predecessors, the PASOK. New Democracy and its allies are collectively responsible for the insufficient human and material fire-fighting resources, but also for the absence of something fit to be called a fire prevention policy.

The terrible recent catastrophe in Greece merely points, unfortunately, to a failure in the system, and in a few days the Greek people will have the chance to chastise a compromised political class and choose others to make political decisions. Let us hope they make the right choice!

**Vladimír Špidla**, *Member of the Commission*. – (CS) Ladies and gentlemen, a debate concerning such an important subject is bound to touch on other topics that are directly or indirectly related.

Allow me to make a few general comments on European solidarity, on the Solidarity Fund and on some events that may provide lessons for the future.

In 2002 I had the experience of leading a country that was struck by terrible floods, together with the Federal Republic of Germany and Austria. It was the scale of that disaster that provided the incentive for the creation of the Solidarity Fund. The disaster occurred in August and the first payments were received by the Czech Republic the following January. I can say without hesitation that it was incredibly fast: starting from zero, formulating a political concept, setting up the structure and putting the aid into practice. That aid was significant and it was very much appreciated in our country.

I have been aware ever since of the importance of solidarity, not just on financial terms, but also in general. I will never forget those Danish and French fire-fighters and the many people from all other parts of Europe who played their part in helping us to cope with that disaster.

My experience made me realise that no matter how well organised a country may be, there will always be disasters that go beyond its own borders. No country can permanently maintain the level of resources necessary to cope with such extreme situations. I therefore believe that it is right to strive to find ways and means that allow us to act in such situations in a coordinated manner at EU level. This is absolutely crucial. The concrete form it will take may still be open to discussion. What is evident, however, is that the capability to react and mobilise all of the possible resources at EU level or through the EU is enormously important and is still insufficient at present. There has been little mention of the fact that Bulgaria did not receive any assistance. The capacity was simply exhausted. There was no hidden deliberation: there were just no aircraft; there was not enough trained personnel.

As regards the aid to Greece specifically, it is now clear that the assistance is ready. It will be implemented at the request of the Greek Government. In any case, all of the Commission bodies will make every effort to ensure that the aid is implemented as quickly and as effectively as possible.

Allow me now to reiterate briefly what I said in my opening statement. We should consider the Solidarity Fund, which since its establishment has already been mobilised in at least 20 or 30 cases. It was created in the aftermath of the floods. It has intervened or helped in cases of devastating hurricanes, such as Hurricanes Gudrun and Kyril. It will now be used to provide assistance in relation to these devastating forest fires. Such are the possibilities of the Structural Funds, which can be restructured as a result of new experiences and new needs, and we are prepared to do just that, galvanised, among other things, by Commissioner Hübner's visit to Greece. Another important lesson I have learnt is that personal experience of such disasters is worth a multitude of television documentaries.

Ladies and gentlemen, in our present debate we have touched upon the problems of climate change, prevention, flood prevention, the environmental protection strategy, urban planning and development, and many others. All these matters are undoubtedly interconnected. That is why it is so important to look for answers at a European level, which is, after all, what we are doing here.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude my speech with a few simple words. Solidarity is necessary, and when you experience it, you feel, even in very difficult situations, that you are much stronger than you ever expected. Thank you.

**President.** – Before concluding the debate, I wish to thank all the Members who have spoken, from all the political groups, for their valuable contributions. I was born in Peschici, one of the villages in southern Italy that was most severely affected by this summer's fires. Three of those who died in the fires came from there. I understand the pain and consternation expressed by many Members and am grateful to you all for being so resolute and to the point. I hope that the Council will be equal to the task of addressing the concerns of Parliament and the Commission.

I have received five motions for a resolution pursuant to Rule 103(2) of the Rules of Procedure<sup>(1)</sup>.

The debate is closed.

The vote will take place on Tuesday.

#### **Written statements (Rule 142)**

**Jorgo Chatzimarkakis (ALDE), in writing.** – (DE) Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, the images of the serious fires in Greece haunted us throughout the entire summer. The swift assistance provided by other EU countries to tackle the fires and the EU's current offer of assistance payments will not be forgotten in Greece.

However, there is something that has been forgotten in Greece for decades, and this brings me to the cause of the recent disaster: namely the need to set up a land register. Greece has been obliged by the EU to act here for some time, but no action has been taken yet. As a consequence, large areas of the Greek forest have remained common land, in effect a no-man's-land. Anyone who burned a section of forest and put a cabin on it could be certain that there would be no comeback; indeed, his action would be legalised after the fact.

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<sup>(1)</sup> See Minutes.



This situation has made arson the national sport. The EU is willing to help the Greek people now, but Greece must take a good look at itself and if necessary give itself a rap on the knuckles. Specifically, this means that if Greece does not complete its land register by 31 August 2008, not only will the penalties accumulated – which run into millions – finally be due; other payments must be considered as well. As the rapporteur for the transparency of agricultural expenditure in the EU, I will be following this very closely.

**Neena Gill (PSE)**, *in writing* – Whilst I appreciate the scale of devastation caused by the Greek forests fires and regret the lives lost within this incident, I must stress that this is indeed a resolution on natural disasters. Therefore I am disappointed that the Commissioner has not made any reference to the floods which occurred in the UK. They caused widespread damage across the country including in my region, the West Midlands. In Worcestershire over 5 000 homes and business were affected and more than 2 000 people were temporarily displaced.

The impact on infrastructure has been significant, with many roads waterlogged for weeks afterwards and some that have totally disappeared. Agriculture was also severely affected and the impact of this is not confined to the loss of produce but also loss of crops, grazing land and next year's yield.

Therefore I would urge the Commission to ensure that the UK's application for funding assistance from the Solidarity Fund is also brought forward to help alleviate some of the immediate consequences of the floods. It is imperative that the systems enabling access to funds are streamlined and that any proposed EU rapid reaction body to assist Member States also covers extreme flooding.

**Péter Olajos (PPE-DE)**, *in writing*. – (HU) The natural disasters in the summer.

Climate change has turned this summer into a catalogue of catastrophes. Record floods, droughts and forest fires have caused devastation across Europe. In Hungary a significant proportion of the maize crop was destroyed due to drought, and more than 400 hectares fell victim to flames in forest fires even though our fire-fighters bravely stood their ground in Hungary – and in Greece too. Now the EU has to draw the right lessons from these events.

I would like to remind you that arson, deliberate fire-raising, is suspected in the case of the conflagrations both in Greece and in Sicily. It is of great importance that the damage caused in the course of any incident of arson where protected natural assets are damaged or destroyed does not lead to a change in the official status of these areas. If it is possible to circumvent the authorities with a deliberately discarded cigarette butt, and if permits, for example building permits, rejected for environment protection reasons can thus be acquired, then soon the whole of Europe will be in flames. The European Union and its Member States must put particular focus on the proper restoration and reconstruction of these devastated areas.

Finally, I would draw attention to one small, unfortunately administrative shortcoming. While it used to be possible, before putting early assistance into place, to get disaster relief funds from the Union quite quickly, even within two months, it now takes almost one year. I hope that the Union will make changes to this practice and aid will once again be processed quickly. Remember: to give quickly is to give double.

**Richard Seiber (PPE-DE)**, *in writing*. – (DE) The frequency, scale, complexity and impact of natural disasters have increased substantially throughout Europe in recent years. The summer of 2007 was marred by massive forest fires and severe flooding, resulting in substantial material and environmental damage. These natural disasters have made it clear, once again, that the existing national resources are reaching their limits, both financially and technically. A well-functioning, efficient and rapid-reaction European civil protection mechanism is therefore an urgent necessity. For that reason, I call for effective engagement from Europe and appeal to the Commission to adopt appropriate measures.

Everyone remembers the flood disasters in Central Europe in 1999, 2001 and 2005 and the devastation they caused in Austria and its neighbouring countries. The EU's disaster relief fund was established in response. The time has now come to make this fund as flexible as possible and to mobilise it without delay. The development of a crisis reaction mechanism will also facilitate a rapid response in larger-scale emergency situations.

**Margie Sudre (PPE-DE)**, *in writing*. – (FR) I support the view expressed in the motion for a resolution and I also wish to express my solidarity with the Greek people affected by this disaster.

The EU ought to provide consequent aid to Greece as soon as possible, and seriously improve its capacities and means in terms of civil protection and emergency action.

Regrettably, the weather has been merciless in other European countries this summer. Cyclone Dean, with winds blowing at over 200 km/h, was one of the most violent hurricanes to hit the Antilles Arc in more than 20 years: it caused extensive damage to the agricultural sector and to the electricity and telecommunications networks in Martinique and Guadeloupe, two of the EU's ultraperipheral regions.

I urge the European Commission to take the required measures to support the agricultural sector in Martinique and Guadeloupe, especially the banana and sugar cane sectors, after their fruit plantations were almost completely destroyed, with disturbing social, economic and human consequences.

It is essential that the new Solidarity Fund and the enhanced EuropeAid programme enter into force as soon as possible.

## **17. Better Regulation - Better law-making 2005; subsidiarity and proportionality - Simplification of the regulatory environment - Use of 'soft law' (debate)**

**President.** – The next item is the joint debate on the following reports:

- A6-0273/2007 by Katalin Lévai, on behalf of the Committee on Legal Affairs, on Better Regulation in the European Union (2007/2095(INI));

- A6-0280/2007 by Bert Doorn, on behalf of the Committee on Legal Affairs, on Better Law-making 2005: application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality - 13th annual report (2006/2279(INI));

- A6-0271/2007 by Giuseppe Gargani, on behalf of the Committee on Legal Affairs, on the strategy for the simplification of the regulatory environment (2007/2096(INI));

- A6-0259/2007 by Manuel Medina Ortega, on behalf of the Committee on Legal Affairs, on institutional and legal implications of the use of 'soft law' instruments (2007/2028(INI)).

**Katalin Lévai (PSE), rapporteur.** – Mr President, I wish to begin by thanking all those who have contributed to my report – I am very grateful for their help.

In recent years, the Commission has become more and more concerned about the quality of Community legislation, both in terms of clarity and accessibility, on the one hand, and of its effectiveness and positive impact on citizens and business, on the other.

The Commission usually refers to these goals as 'better regulation' or 'better law making'. As a matter of fact, better regulation aims at maximising the benefits of modern, rational and effective legislation, whilst minimising its costs, so that productivity, growth and ultimately employment can be ensured at the highest level throughout the European Union.

There is no doubt that better regulation is fundamental to ensuring a fair and competitive market place, citizens' welfare and the effective protection of public health and the environment. It is an important part of the Lisbon Strategy, as it can boost productivity and employment significantly. Better regulation is shared responsibility. EU laws are transposed into national law by national governments and parliaments and are often applied at regional and local level. There is a risk that laws are progressively embellished along this chain from conception to implementation. The responsibility for regulating well is hence a shared one.

Many Member States now carry out impact assessments, and some have been developed guidelines. However, only a relatively small number of countries systematically carry out an integrated impact assessment for new legislative proposals.

Legislating at European level has reduced much red tape. One common rule to apply in all Member States is much simpler and more efficient than a complex web of varying rules at national and regional level. European legislation has been effective in removing harmful barriers to competition and conflicting national rules, so the simplification programme can generate tangible economic benefits not only through reducing administrative burdens. The experience of Member States demonstrates that public authorities can do a lot to reduce unwarranted administrative burdens of legislation. Such action, according to the Commission, would boost the EU economy by about 1.5% of the GDP and free up an estimated EUR 150 billion for investment.

In my report, I support the objective of ensuring that the regulatory environment is necessary, simple and effective. On the other hand, however, we have to stress that such a process should be fully transparent and

based on the full involvement of the European Parliament with public scrutiny and wide and open consultation of experts and all the relevant stakeholders – not only government or business, but, particularly, non-governmental organisations as well.

Furthermore, I would like to suggest the creation of an impact assessment board. It is of the utmost importance that this body, which will offer advice and support in developing a culture of high-quality impact assessment inside the Commission, acts independently of the policy-making departments. However, this does not necessarily mean that impact assessments must be carried out by external experts who do not belong to the institution. It is also necessary that the impact assessment board helps develop a common methodology for all impact assessments.

Furthermore, I would suggest a special project within the impact assessment procedure – so-called ‘social benchmarking’. This project should focus particularly on sensible target groups, for example disadvantaged people, women, ethnic minorities, parents raising children, the elderly, and permanently ill and disabled people.

In summary, I should like to emphasise that better regulation aims at more simple, clear, citizen-friendly regulation, with continuous impact assessment, with a special focus on those vulnerable groups that cannot defend themselves. Clarity, transparency, simplicity, cutting red tape are perhaps the key elements of my report.

**Bert Doorn (PPE-DE), rapporteur.** – (NL) Mr President, I would like to take up Mrs Lévai’s excellent argument. It is a good thing that we take time in Parliament to consider the quality of legislation and regulations at least once a year. Our regulations and legislation are the visiting card of the European Union. They form the framework within which our citizens work and live and within which companies have to operate. This means that we have to place a great deal of emphasis on their quality.

How are things at the moment? They are moving in the right direction. The Commission has unfolded a number of initiatives. An Impact Assessment Board has been set up and it is doing a great deal of good work. However, that is not enough. I have said it before many times: we need greater transparency and I make the case once again for an external expert panel to evaluate whether the impact assessments of the Commission have been drawn up in accordance with the right methodology.

We need a review, not bureaucracy. Mrs Frassoni always cries: ‘You want more bureaucracy’, but I do not want any bureaucracy at all. I only want more transparency and I think that every form of transparency is a virtue in government. An additional advantage is that when impact assessments are carried out of amendments in Parliament itself – and I have to say, they have still not been a great success – we can look at whether we could put them to an independent body of this nature, rather than the Impact Assessment Board of the Commission.

The fact that there is to be an expert panel for the problem of administrative burdens is an important step in the right direction. That is a very positive development that should have a role to play in the area of red tape. Of course, who will sit on that panel is very important. It must not become a procession, of course; it must not be a kind of pseudo-parliament, but a small committee of experts: so no captains of industry, no civil servants, no politicians, but ordinary professional people who know what an impact assessment is, who know what red tape is and who have plenty of experience in this area in their national contexts.

The Commission has set a clear target: administrative burdens must be reduced by 25% by 2012. That is a very good thing but it should, of course, be a net target. This means that a reduction of 25% from now should, in fact, be achieved and that new administrative burdens should be included in the calculation and deducted from the result, otherwise it will just be a waste of time.

I would like to highlight one more point that warrants special attention from the Commission. We are discussing reducing administrative burdens now, but in the future we will also need to work on reducing compliance costs. Compliance costs are the costs that companies and citizens are forced to incur in order to comply with legislation and they are extremely high. When we are discussing the costs of regulations, we must also concern ourselves with the compliance costs, which are ignored at the moment.

**Giuseppe Gargani (PPE-DE), rapporteur.** – (IT) Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, in November 2006 the Commission adopted a working document, an initial report, on progress made in the strategy for the simplification of the regulatory environment, which is a follow-up to another communication of October 2005. This is an important development that, as Mr Doorn has rightly said, continues a process that we

ourselves initiated with a view to achieving simplification that equates with transparency and is a transparent, comprehensible method of law-making.

The working document has been approved by the Committee on Legal Affairs, which has taken stock of progress achieved in implementing the simplification programme introduced, as I said, in 2005. In particular, the programme will include 43 recasts, and I would like to give the House the following figures: 12 codifications, 8 repeals and 46 other measures relating to substantive simplification. In addition to these, 500 new legislative initiatives have been included in another rolling programme specifically dedicated to codifications, some 200 of them in 2007 alone.

At this point I should like to single out a few points, naturally very briefly, which form the crux of my report, so as to inform the House of the actual situation on the ground as well as the overall thinking of the Committee on Legal Affairs as a whole.

I have three clear messages for the Commission. I believe it is important to make perfectly plain that there is a need, firstly, to systematically include simplification initiatives, from now on, in a specific part of the legislative and work programme; secondly, to indicate therein what priority it intends to give to each individual simplification initiative; and thirdly, to avoid the proliferation of documents containing lists of simplification initiatives, in order to have as clear a reference framework as possible.

I would therefore stress once again that the Commission needs to be consistent, in relation to the simplification aims it has highlighted, too. Likewise, recasting should become, once and for all, the standard legislative technique. Overall, as Chairman of the committee to which our colleagues Mrs Lévai, Mr Doorn and Mr Medina belong, I believe I can say that these four regulatory initiatives cover the situation comprehensively and that the Commission is duty-bound to reflect on them.

It would thus always be possible to have the regulatory text in its entirety, even where there are specific amendments, with a clear indication of the new parts and those that remain unchanged. This is a crucial draft text for Parliament, as it would result in making Community legislation more readable and more transparent, which is what everyone wants.

The Commission working document in fact proposes using the initial summaries of its proposals to better explain the aims of simplification. This initiative could prove counterproductive, however: whereas a summary may be justified for a discursive text such as a communication, the same does not apply to a regulatory text, the initial summary of which might contain some uncertainty. Very careful attention needs to be paid to this point.

Finally, the report seeks to highlight the strong signal of goodwill given by the amendment of the European Parliament's Rules of Procedure relating to the improvement and introduction, respectively, of the codification procedure (Rule 80) and a new *ad hoc* procedure for recasts (Rule 80(a)). These are the matters that Parliament must consider, I hope in a consensual manner and overall without amendment, so that the House will be able to signal its approval of this important matter tomorrow.

**Manuel Medina Ortega (PSE), rapporteur.** – (ES) Mr President, my report is a contradiction because I have used a contradictory expression: 'soft law'. Law is not soft, law is coercive. The thing is that EU jargon tends to use this expression: 'soft law instruments'.

What does this mean? It means primarily documents drawn up by the Commission: some of these are interpretative, others are implementing acts, while others are merely preparatory documents. The problem posed is that given the confusion and lack of knowledge about the nature of Community law in many jurisdictions, including the Court of Justice itself, legal force is accorded to 'soft law' documents.

This is a breach of the basic legal principles of the EU Member States and the European Union as a whole. The only current legitimacy for issuing compulsory rules with a legal basis stems from the wishes of the people at both national and EU level, and the wishes of the people are normally expressed through representational bodies such as, in this case, the European Parliament, elected directly by the people, or the Council, composed of governments that depend on and are elected by the people in their respective countries.

Obviously the Commission has a major role to play in the application of European law as the guarantor of application of the Treaties, but it must do this in conjunction with the legislative bodies, and it certainly cannot replace the legislative powers conferred by the Treaties on Parliament and the Council.

Our concern in the Committee on Legal Affairs is, firstly, that we have no wish to hamper the Commission's right of initiative, we have no wish to hamper the executive functions that must be carried out by the Commission, we have no wish to curtail the possibilities of development, but we do feel that it is important to establish a conceptual difference between the two types of instrument, and that when the Commission feels that it must avail itself of this kind of action, it ought to establish cooperation at least with Parliament, and certainly with the Council, so that preparations for such action do not give rise to misinterpretations or interference.

What law certainly cannot be is what has been termed the 'open method of coordination'. The open method of coordination may be an extremely effective instrument in achieving the objectives of the Treaty, but it may only establish obligations among participating parties. This would be tantamount to contracts between parties, between social agents, for instance. In the same way as an agreement between trades unions and business, for example, may be binding on the parties involved, the open method of coordination may be used to draw up this kind of contract, but it is subject to Community regulations and can never replace them, and the European Union as a community based on law requires the adoption of legal texts.

Thus we cannot merely say 'we intend to use the open method of coordination' because it is an effective instrument for achieving EU objectives. It is not an effective instrument because the European Union can only operate as a legal system.

The European Union has no army and no police force, and has operated on the basis of acceptance by the Member States of a number of obligations met by their institutions, compliance with which is supervised by the Commission and the Court of Justice. The open method of coordination, however, is not a legal method, it is not a legal instrument for producing general laws, and the two concepts cannot be confused.

As Mr Gargani said earlier, the Committee on Legal Affairs is worried about this anti-law tendency within the EU. The European Parliament wishes to work alongside the Commission on attaining its objectives, on its executive functions and on its functions in the drafting of legal texts. However, it cannot and must not condone the use of techniques that are at odds with the development of the rule of law, with development of the construction of the EU as a legal entity, a community that must have a clear hierarchy of rules: a set of Treaties - which I still call constitutional, despite everything - laying down the fundamental laws, and EU legislation covering all areas where the EU must play its role, while naturally observing the principles of proportionality and subsidiarity but maintaining the Union's competences and establishing the legislative action to be taken, reserving for the purposes of execution instruments such as this open method of coordination or any other instrument the Commission may feel has to be adopted to achieve the EU's objectives.

*(Applause)*

**Günter Verheugen**, *Vice-President of the Commission*. – (DE) Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, better regulation is a highly political project. At the last major debate on this issue here in this House in April last year, I emphasised that we want to achieve two objectives: firstly, we want to increase citizens' confidence in the entire system of European integration, and secondly, we must establish clear and dependable parameters for the European economy so that it can provide jobs and growth.

Since then, we have made good progress. According to the polls, public endorsement of European integration is higher than it has been for a long time, our economic position has greatly improved and is looking bright, and we have a broad consensus for continuing the course embarked upon, based on our partnership for growth and employment. As part of this policy for jobs and growth, better regulation is a key pillar. Although the overall political situation is currently very favourable, we must not slacken our efforts now; on the contrary, we must utilise the current momentum.

After all, the mood can turn again just as swiftly, and we would be deluding ourselves if we believed that the European Union's image has already fundamentally changed. People still have it firmly in their heads that everything that comes out of Europe is irrelevant, overblown in scope and centralistic. This accusation is undoubtedly exaggerated, but it is important to recognise that this is the European public's perception. We therefore have to work hard to counter this reflex.

We want a Europe of results. We want a Europe which brings security, prosperity and environmental protection to all spheres of life. That must be expressed in all our practical decisions in every area of policy, whether it be in chemicals law, in the pharmaceuticals industry, in information technology or in agriculture. Make no mistake: better regulation is not an image campaign. We have completely overhauled our policy

style and the way in which we prepare and review legislation. I say again: better regulation must not be viewed in isolation but as part of an overall strategy, a fundamentally new direction in European politics.

Similar attempts have been made in the past, but this project which we are talking about today has two very special features: its scope and its sustainability. In the past, we have focused on *ad hoc* adjustments. Now, however, we have extended the scope of the 'better regulation' concept to encompass the entire European legislative process, from assessing the need for a law, with strict subsidiarity checks, to broad consultation with stakeholder groups, assessment of economic, social and environmental policy impacts, to the issue of the best possible application and implementation of Community law. However, better legislation not only relates to new initiatives; we are also in the process of reviewing the existing *acquis* in its entirety to determine where and how it can be simplified and updated.

The second new aspect is sustainability, which we are pursuing with this approach. This is not a one-off campaign; as some of the rapporteurs have already said, this is a process which is both deep and far-reaching and is being pursued consistently. All the initiatives tabled which have not been adopted by the legislature will be regularly reviewed and, if necessary, withdrawn. One such review is currently taking place with a view to the work programme for 2008.

Our simplification programme will be continued in 2007 and 2008 as well and we will be unveiling a range of new initiatives here. The outcome will be progressive coverage of all the European Union's areas of legislation. We are deploying all the methods at our disposal, as outlined and supported by Mr Gargani in his report. Half of the initiatives envisaged in the simplification programme have already been successfully completed, and we will pursue this work intensively until 2009. This will lead to direct and tangible benefits for companies, public authorities and individuals. Our goal is to achieve a situation in which our legislation is, in every case, clear, comprehensible and user-friendly and also takes account of technological progress.

For the purposes of quality control and impact assessment, we have set up the Impact Assessment Board, which operates independently of the relevant Commission services and is already making a very positive contribution. I am most grateful to Mrs Lévai for pledging her full support for this body in her report. However, I would also like to make it very clear to you that we are committed to reviewing this system next year and that we will take appropriate steps, as required, based on the findings of this review. I would like to emphasise that in light of the important points raised by Mr Doorn.

One of the major priorities this year is reducing the administrative burdens arising for companies as a result of EU rules. To that end, we have already unveiled 10 'fast track actions', and thanks to the European Parliament's prompt support, two of them have already been implemented successfully. Further proposals will follow.

We are now in the process of implementing comprehensive monitoring of the current burdens; this monitoring is taking place in 10 major economic sectors, which in practice covers around 85% of Europe's entire economy. This is to enable us to identify the reduction potential. The target – as has already been stated – is to reduce these costs by 25% by the year 2012. I fully endorse what Mr Doorn has said. Of course it is important to ensure that having reduced burdens in one area, new legislation does not create other burdens elsewhere. That is a very important point and I am most grateful to Parliament for drawing attention to it.

I hope that the Member States will set equally ambitious goals before the end of this year, for this project can only be successful if it is pursued jointly at European and national level.

Naturally, stakeholder groups have an important role to play in this project, and we need their support. That is why a high-level independent panel of experts will be established, representing small and medium-sized enterprises, consumers and environmental organisations, whose role is to advise the Commission on potential reduction measures.

The Commission is extremely grateful, as I am, to the European Parliament for its broad support, expressed in the reports we are debating today. The Commission is especially pleased that Mrs Lévai's report urges the Council and Parliament to undertake systematic impact assessments of proposed amendments having potential significant impacts. We had already agreed on this in November 2005 in common interinstitutional approaches.

The Commission would also ask the Council and Parliament to endorse the proposal made by Mr Doorn and further adapt their working methods so that certain tasks relating to the simplification of legislation can be carried out swiftly. It does not help us, after all, if projects remain in the pipeline.

In relation to the various instruments summarised as soft law in Mr Medina Ortega's report, the Commission wishes to emphasise that classic legislation is not always the most appropriate solution. I would like to underline the principle yet again: laws should only be adopted where absolutely necessary. We have other instruments whose application is clearly regulated by the Community Treaties, as well as those which serve solely to pave the way for future legislation. On behalf of the entire Commission, I truly can promise you that in all the instruments that we are applying, we completely respect the rights of Parliament and will keep Parliament fully informed in the interests of mutual respect between our institutions.

Let me conclude by reiterating what President Barroso stated, in this House last April, to be the basic principle. European legislation is indeed the unique and defining feature of the European Union, for we are a legal community. European integration is based on the law. Only the law can guarantee the freedoms that Europeans enjoy today, and only the law can provide the economy with dependable and fair parameters. The citizens of Europe have a right to expect not just better legislation but the best legislation that is humanly possible.

### IN THE CHAIR: DIANA WALLIS

*Vice-President*

**Gunnar Hökmark (PPE-DE)**, *Draftsman of the opinion of the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs.* – Madam President, first of all I should like to thank the rapporteur on better regulation in the European Union, Mrs Lévai, and the Committee on Legal Affairs, for accepting a number of the proposals made by my Committee, which is very much appreciated.

This is an area in which it is very easy to agree on our goal. However, that is not what the debate is about: it is about how to achieve results. The role of the Commission in this must be underlined. The Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs has proposed that the Commission conduct an annual follow-up on the results of reducing the administrative burden by 25% by 2012. The role of the Commission is also important in enabling choices to be made when discussing legislation or, for example, self-regulation or mutual recognition, and in ensuring that we have some such legislation and – something which the Commission has also done – in withdrawing legislation that is not consistent with the Lisbon process.

We would like the Commission to see the Lamfalussy process as a good experience that has opened up financial markets in harmony with reality. However, we would also like to underline the Commission's own responsibilities, in its direct relations with citizens, to secure simplification and better regulation regarding research funding, grants, state aid, subsidies of various kinds and procurements. The Commission does have a role to play on its own in this area. We would also hope that the Commission will come back to the idea of giving citizens the right of action when Member States do go in for gold-plating. It is important to have a counterbalance to the ever-increasing bureaucracy of all our local and national authorities and, one might also say, of the institutions of the European Union. One way of doing this would be to give citizens the right of action.

**Ole Christensen (PSE)**, *draftsman of the opinion of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs.* – (DA) Madam President, the regulatory environment in which businesses operate is a determinant of their competitiveness, of sustainable growth and of employment performance in terms of creating more and better jobs. As I also said in the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, we naturally support the exercise of weeding out superfluous legislation, but we must make sure that the legislation we are eliminating is indeed superfluous. From my point of view as a member of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, the answer will depend on whether the quality of jobs in Europe worsens or improves.

I support better regulation only if the intention is to make legislation more transparent and flexible, and not if it really means deregulation. What is crucial is that it is done without impairing worker health and safety. The 25% reduction target laid down is open to doubt, however, as it was chosen at random. If the legislation is superfluous, we should not be stopping at 25%. On the whole, however, I fully agree with the objective of the exercise, and I recognise that the EU's unnecessary administrative burdens undermine the effectiveness and credibility of EU legislation. I would invite the Commission to also increase the use of the social dialogue, an important tool for achieving the objective of better regulation.

**Elsbeth Attwooll (ALDE)**, *draftsman of the opinion of the Committee on Regional Development.* – Madam President, I speak specifically on Mrs Lévai's report. I congratulate her and the Committee on Legal Affairs for its excellence and thank them for incorporating so much of both the spirit and letter of our opinion into it.

Although the ultimate responsibility for conformity with Community legislation belongs to Member States, the actual meeting of the requirements is largely tasked to other bodies, such as regional and local authorities and specialised agencies. This may mean ensuring their own compliance and/or that of others with regulations and directives alike. Furthermore, where certain directives are concerned, the constitutional regions have a role to play in the transposition process.

The Committee on Regional Development wishes accordingly to stress the importance of widespread consultation at all stages of the legislative process, including the preparation of impact assessments to allow national, regional and local variations to be taken into account. We stress, too, the importance of disseminating information. We call in particular for advance guidance on the transposition of directives and for the provision of implementation guidelines where regulations are concerned. The *Vade Mecum* on State Aid produced by DG Competition is a model of the latter.

We call also for the use in legislation of clear and comprehensible language and for the provision of correlation tables in the transposition of directives, so that the risk of gold-plating is diminished. With these and the other measures advocated in the report – indeed, in all four reports – we believe that we should do much to achieve better regulation in the EU.

**Andreas Schwab (PPE-DE)**, *draftsman of the opinion of the Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection.* – (DE) Madam President, ladies and gentlemen, let me start with an apology. I was not aware that the previous speaker was absent and that the speaking time had been changed. Thank you for permitting me to speak now.

I was the rapporteur for the opinion of the Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection and after in-depth deliberations, the committee adopted this position by consensus. I would like to point out, first of all, that there was agreement within our committee that soft law – or whatever we want to call these measures which are now being applied increasingly frequently in European law but also in national legislation – has become a very common practice which offers the opportunity to respond flexibly and therefore swiftly to new developments, which is why it should not be criticised *per se*.

We also agreed to some extent that the Commission – to turn to the European level – uses soft law in individual cases as a means of circumventing the opportunities for the participation of the legislator as provided for by law. This, in our view, is a major problem relating to soft law. We discussed, too, the fact that Parliament endorsed the complaint against the Commission in one case because we ascertained that such circumvention had indeed occurred.

We believe that the legislator encounters soft law in such diverse ways today that we must always make a clear distinction between what genuinely only comes on to the market in the form of a green paper, on the one hand – in other words, it is simply planned as preparation for further legislation – and on the other, what is genuinely necessary for flexible legislation in the framework of soft law.

As members of the Committee on Internal Market and Consumer Protection, we do not identify any legislative, any direct impact of such green and white papers, but we believe that when new legislation is adopted, the legislator must always adopt a new decision as well.

The debate, after all, not only focuses on soft law but also on other benchmarks for better law-making, and I believe that in many areas, we certainly have not made as much progress as citizens now assume from the media, which is why all the institutions involved – Parliament, the Council and the Commission – have a responsibility to make faster progress in this area.

**Gary Titley**, *on behalf of the PSE Group.* – Madam President, I wish to begin by making three statements to set the context of this debate. Firstly, we must not forget that one person's red tape is another person's vital piece of legislation. Secondly, we should not forget, as Commissioner Verheugen has said in the past, that 50% of the administrative burden relating to EU legislation is added by Member States. Finally, the most important thing is that the European Union is itself a simplification process, because by having one set of rules instead of 27 we have cut business costs enormously in comparison to what life was like before many European Union laws were passed.

Having said that, legislation has to be clear, easy to understand and to enforce, and adaptable to changing circumstances. That has not always been the case in the past, and sometimes one wondered whether the overall effort of producing and enforcing a piece of legislation did not outweigh in some ways the benefits



to be derived from it. That is why I would support what the Commission has been trying to do in its drive for better regulation and simplification, and in particular the establishment of an impact assessment board.

It is important that all the institutions realise their role in this. It is all very well for Parliament or the Council to pontificate about better regulation, so long as, when it comes to amendments, we ourselves look at the impact of those amendments. Parliament also has a responsibility to look at existing legislation and analyse it in depth to see whether it has had the effect it wanted. We tend to agonise for months over this or that amendment, but often put no effort into finding out whether the legislation has had its desired effect. I would hope therefore that we, as a Parliament, might step up our own efforts to participate in this process.

**Jan Mulder (ALDE).** – (NL) Madam President, I would also like to begin by thanking all of the rapporteurs for their extremely interesting reports. It is very important that Parliament pays a great deal of attention to this issue and I entirely share the view of the Commissioner that many citizens in Europe have the impression that all bad laws come out of Brussels. National parliamentarians claim far too often that they cannot help it, that it is Brussels that is imposing them upon them. We must do all in our power to refute this as soon as possible.

This is the first time that I have spoken on an issue from the Committee on Legal Affairs, and I am speaking in this debate firstly because the topic interests me greatly. I myself am a member of the Committee on Budgets and the Committee on Budgetary Control. Last year in the Committee on Budgets we approved a proposal that I had written to create a body, a pilot project, to assess administrative burdens independently of the Commission. That means, therefore, that Parliament felt that the internal assessment in the Commission was not sufficient. I completely agree with Mr Doorn that we have to have a body outside the Commission that will assess the effects of legislation. The text in the budget that has meanwhile been approved by the Council and Parliament should be the guide for the Commission to take further action. The Committee on Budgetary Control also prepared a report that was adopted in plenary in July.

We support the target of a 25% reduction in administrative burdens and naturally – and the Commissioner and Mr Doorn have also confirmed this already – laws that we have just repealed must not be allowed to come back in through the back door as new legislation. It is important that we review all legislation before 2013 to see whether it is redundant or not. The Commission should publish regular reports or other announcements stating what has been achieved. The Commission's actions and the measures taken to reduce administrative burdens should be transparent. An internal reorganisation of the Commission may prove necessary.

Finally, to conclude what I have to say, I would like to thank Mr Verheugen for the outstanding cooperation I have had with his departments on developing the pilot project that was adopted by this House last year.

**Zbigniew Krzysztof Kuźmiuk,** *on behalf of the UEN Group.* – (PL) Madam President, in taking the floor on behalf of the UEN Group in this debate on better law-making in the European Union, I should like to draw attention to the following issues.

Firstly, the authors advocate better law-making, aimed at increasing the efficiency, effectiveness, cohesion and transparency of Union legislation. Consequently, the process should comply with the following conditions, and I support this view:

- it is essential for the Council, the Commission and the European Parliament to work together on the matter;
- there should be broad and open consultation on the matter with all interested parties, including entrepreneurs, local authorities and non-governmental organisations, and I would like to emphasise the importance of such consultation;
- Community bodies should be given more responsibility for the law-making process and the overall transparency of the process should be improved;
- every assessment of legislation aimed at its simplification should, however, ascribe equal importance to economic and social issues, and take account of issues relating to health and environmental protection;
- in addition, the process of simplifying legislation should not lead to a lowering of the standards enshrined in the Union's current *acquis*.

Secondly, the authors also point out that unnecessary and unclear expressions should be avoided when drafting legal provisions. The language used should be straightforward and easy to understand. At the same

time, the terminology should be precise and legal certainty ensured, so that the Union's legislation can be understood by its citizens, who now number almost 500 million.

Thirdly, the decision taken at the 2007 Spring Council to achieve a 25% reduction of the administrative burden resulting from Union legislation by 2012 should be warmly welcomed. We can but hope that this objective is more realistic and has a greater chance of being achieved than the objectives of the Lisbon Strategy.

Fourthly, it should also be pointed out that the reports contained proposals for alternative solutions regarding the introduction of new legislation. The former included self-regulation or mutual recognition of national provisions, and even the option of not undertaking any legislative action. All these proposals merit detailed consideration in view of the dramatic increase in Union legislation.

**Monica Frassoni**, *on behalf of the Verts/ALE Group.* – (IT) Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to thank my colleagues for their hard work and raise another matter. Although this is a highly political issue, as Commissioner Verheugen said, it is also awkward and often technical; handling it is particularly complicated, especially when it comes to asking what the term 'better regulation' might mean for citizens in practice.

I wish to say very briefly that, as concerns the reports by Mr Gargani and Mr Medina, my group agrees with virtually everything. However, on the subject of alternatives to legislation I wanted to point out, as did the Commissioner, the need to make it clear that their application is extremely unsatisfactory, and I am referring above all to self-regulation and co-regulation. As Mr Medina indicated, the main thing is to focus on the legal and legislative value of acts.

Mr Doorn is well aware that I and my Group have doubts about the idea of concentrating all our attention on subsidiarity and proportionality, that is, on the initial topic of his report, and on administrative costs. For us, the question of administrative costs is a minor problem compared with that of the overall capacity of our regulations and our institutions to produce legislation that is clear, can be applied in a fair and balanced manner, is unambiguous and, above all, is not open to varying interpretations. Discussing these aspects is at least as important as discussing cost.

Moreover, as Mr Titley has already said, the existence of high administrative costs is obviously something that depends mainly on the Member States, and in my view not enough attention is being paid to these factors. For example, I would like to know one thing: how much will it cost, Mr Verheugen, to do everything that is being asked of you? Committees, reports, monitoring: all of this costs money, and if we really are to go down the road of setting up this huge structure, we must know how much it will cost.

**Daniel Stroj**, *on behalf of the GUE/NGL Group.* – (CS) Mr President, Commissioner, I consider it a very positive step that we are discussing together all the reports connected by the common theme of creating and revising the Community's secondary law.

I would like to comment briefly on Mr Gargani's report. I believe that the report is very good on the whole and I therefore recommend that the House adopt it. I fully agree with the proposal that the strategy of simplifying the legal environment should have political priority. In that regard, however, I believe that it is necessary to strengthen the role of the European Parliament in the legislative process. What I have in mind here is that Parliament should have the same law-making initiative as the Commission, which would undoubtedly have a positive effect on the process of simplifying and improving the quality of the legal environment in Europe.

I would also like to voice my reservations regarding the targets set by the Commission, which stipulate that not only Community but also national legislation should be reduced by 25% by the year 2012. The schedule of simplification for the years 2006-2009 provides for 43 revisions, 12 codifications, 26 other measures and 8 repeals. But at the same time 500 new legislative initiatives are expected in the area of codifications alone. This makes me think that the Commission's plans for reduction in the secondary Community legislation are not realistic.

**Jens-Peter Bonde**, *on behalf of the IND/DEM Group.* – (DA) Madam President, I should like to thank the Committee on Legal Affairs and the rapporteur for a sound report on 'soft law' – a dirty word that fortunately does not exist in Danish. I am the rapporteur on the same subject in the European Economic Area Joint Parliamentary Committee, and we fully endorse Mr Medina Ortega's conclusions. In 2005 the Commission's internal market experts issued a recommendation on copyright protection for composers and authors. This was coordinated with the Directorate-General for Competition in cases against rights agencies. The Danish

copyright society KODA has been constantly threatened with a fine of 10% of its turnover since 1973. I would call on Commission President José Manuel Barroso to intervene and defend cultural diversity.

The recommendation and competition case together amount to hard law and expropriation – which constitutes an infringement of EU law, as that effect can only legally be produced by means of legislation. An unelected executive cannot legislate and expropriate by means of recommendations and competition cases. Instead, it should be putting forward a proposal for a directive on artists' copyright and rights agencies, as we requested in the Lévai report. As elected representatives of the people, we represent music consumers, artists, radio, TV and many small and medium-sized enterprises that make a living from varied cultural provision. We reject administrative legislation for the benefit of a handful of multinationals. Elected representatives should always be consulted before the Commission issues such recommendations.

**Andreas Mölzer**, *on behalf of the ITS Group.* – (DE) Madam President, of course less bureaucracy and more legal clarity are desirable, and of course it is high time we got rid of old and obsolete regulations and directives. If we take the 'Sunshine Directive', for example, this was principally designed to limit workers' exposure to UV radiation, but anyone who denies the ordinary citizen a modicum of common sense from the outset should not be at all surprised by the accusations about the EU's regulatory madness and excessive bureaucracy, currently reflected in the plethora of EU agencies springing up everywhere.

The citizens are undoubtedly smarter than the EU establishment gives them credit for, and they also notice that alongside the regulatory zeal – the proverbial regulatory madness – a kind of deregulatory madness is occurring, namely when it comes to the rights and security of citizens themselves. So that no one can be accused of discrimination, for example, Muslims and other immigrant groups are constantly being given almost carte blanche to break the law, and at the same time, the demand for non-European skilled workers is putting the labour market under more and more pressure in order to circumvent collective agreements and other social rights. That really is unacceptable, in my view.

The citizens are also rightly aggrieved about a Constitution that was negotiated behind closed doors and has now been cosmetically enhanced, and about their lack of a voice in the various rounds of EU enlargement. Action under the slogan of taking the EU closer to the citizens cannot distract from the real problems, in my view. Brussels must learn to accept it when citizens say 'no', and must learn to base its decisions on the will of the people. The aim must be a federal Europe of subsidiarity, a Europe in which democracy, the rule of law and transparency prevail, a Europe with which the citizens can finally identify once again.

**Irena Belohorská (NI).** – (SK) Firstly, I would like to focus on the need for codification. There are countless legislative regulations within the European Union; these affect a vast range of social relations. Since there are so many of them, they are too complex and not easy to navigate. The EU's legislative acts are not meant only for lawyers: ordinary citizens of the European Union work with them as well. There is a problem here and it relates to the links between these acts and the national legislative acts.

Even if citizens of the European Union look up a given law, they often have no idea that there are other EU acts fundamentally linked to it. That is why I propose to address in detail the issue of codification of laws so that research and their subsequent practical application are easier.

Secondly, I would like to focus on the amendments tabled in the European Parliament. In my opinion, it is not practical to 'enrich' the original EU text with amendments that are often nonsensical. Some of them have no fundamental impact on the topic in question, being simply linguistic alterations. Some broaden the scope of the future law to such an extent that there is duplication of legislation and ensuing confusion. The solution to one problem should not be provided in several Community acts since this makes the situation less clear.

As a result, by the time it leaves the European Parliament an amended legislative act can often be almost twice the size of the European Commission text; this does not make things any simpler or any clearer. Codification should be based on the principles of effectiveness, efficiency, accountability, transparency and continuity.

**Klaus-Heiner Lehne**, *on behalf of the PPE-DE Group.* – (DE) Madam President, ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of my Group, I would like to make just three comments on points of principle. The first concerns impact assessment for legislative proposals. I recognise that significant progress has been made since 1999, when Parliament took the initiative on this issue, and since 2003, when an interinstitutional agreement was adopted, which was negotiated by our Chairman, Mr Gargani. However, there are still deficits. Parliament is demanding – as it has done before in numerous resolutions – that impact assessments of legislative proposals be conducted on a more independent basis. I make no secret of the fact that to my mind, we should be thinking about

whether we should adopt the US model of an independent agency which is established outside the Commission and undertakes impact assessments of legislation in line with a standardised procedure not only for the Commission but for all other institutions as well.

However, another key point based on our experience in the Committee on Legal Affairs is that impact assessments are not actually being carried out as standard on every Commission proposal. I can cite two specific examples from the Directorate-General for Justice and one from the Internal Market Directorate-General that have remained in my memory.

I also think that it is important to give serious consideration to the possibility of carrying out impact assessments in comitology procedures too, as it is often here that the bureaucracy arises as a result of the comitology decisions and the associated burdens.

As to soft law, Mr Medina Ortega's report has my full backing. Indeed, in the Committee on Legal Affairs we increasingly have the impression that the European Commission is misusing the instrument of soft law in order to circumvent Parliament's codecision rights. It is not acceptable for the Commission to make decisions as a legislative body at the proposal of the Directorate-General for Competition on which it consults Parliament, yet this is not the case for recommendations relating to the internal market.

As my final point, I would like to draw attention to the issue of simplification. We need an institutional agreement on simplification as a matter of urgency, as we have in other areas, in order to ensure that we have an efficient procedure. We do not want to open a Pandora's box and instead of simplifying matters, end up with even greater complexity.

**Lidia Joanna Geringer de Oedenberg (PSE).** - (PL) Madam President, it is pleasing to note that in recent years the European Commission has become increasingly concerned about the quality of the Union's legislation. The Commission is striving to ensure, on the one hand, that legislation is transparent and accessible, and on the other, that it is effective and has a positive impact on the citizens and on entrepreneurship.

Better laws increase the benefits derived from modern and effective legislation whilst simultaneously reducing the cost of its implementation to a minimum. The Commission's communication of 14 November 2006 on a strategic review of better regulation in the European Union, together with the stated objective of achieving a 25% reduction of the administrative burden by 2012, represent a key first step on the way to resolving the problem at both European and national level.

The communication also emphasises the need for the Council and the European Parliament to provide regular impact assessments concerning the main changes to the proposals, and for greater importance to be attached to the proposals concerning simplification of legislation in the framework of codification and repeal of outdated legal acts. In this connection, it is particularly important to set up a special Council to deal with impact assessment and strengthen implementation of Community legislation through preventive actions undertaken by Member States from the earliest stages of implementation of Community legislation.

As part of the ongoing work on better legislation it is crucial for the European Parliament both to become involved in the interinstitutional debate, and also to act as co-legislator in the adoption of the legal acts derived from such a process. It is important to emphasise the new principles of comitology in this House. They strengthen control by the European Parliament and Council of the Commission's executive powers, thus contributing to simplification of Community legislation.

Regarding the role of the Commission, the latter should require rather than recommend Member States to submit correlation tables for inspection, particularly in order to facilitate checking of the process of transposition of directives in each of the Member States. The Commission should also be urged to introduce easily comprehensible and transparent language into the legislative proposals submitted, whilst retaining legal certainty and accuracy of terminology.

**Leopold Józef Rutowicz (UEN).** - (PL) Madam President, better law-making is very relevant to the harmonisation of action within the European Union. I should like to congratulate all the rapporteurs on excellent reports. Thanks are due to Mrs Lévai, Mr Doorn, Mr Gargani, and Mr Medina Ortega.

A tendency to deal with as many problems as possible through legal regulation has become evident in many national parliaments and also in this House. It often results from a belief that issues can be resolved by devising a provision. In so doing we try to take account of all the arguments, of lobbyists and of the special interests concerned. As a result, legal provisions lack transparency and are difficult for the citizens, enterprises and

the administration to understand. They end up as huge documents that lack transparency and are difficult to transpose into the legislation of all countries.

Better law-making should involve the use of legislative instruments with a view to achieving the aims laid down in the Treaty. Co-regulation and self-regulation may be used to supplement legislative measures, but only when they provide for better or equal scope than the methods involved in application of legislation.

Better law-making and refraining from dealing with as many matters as possible through legislation are not new issues, but they need to be dealt with as quickly as possible. Assessment of the legislative implications, ensuring terminological precision and legal certainty, limiting recourse to abbreviations and unduly lengthy recitals should result in better, more modern, rational and effective legislation. The action undertaken will significantly reduce the administrative costs incurred by Parliament, interested parties and those affected by the legislation introduced.

The application of so-called soft law based on Community practice represents a further challenge. Soft law does not guarantee full legal protection; it is not binding and gives rise to legal reservations. It must not be used instead of legal acts in areas for which the Community has legislative powers. The issues covered in the studies are of great practical significance and call for further swift action. The success of better regulation will depend very largely on the European Commission, working in cooperation with Parliament and the Council.

**Roger Knapman (IND/DEM).** - Madam President, this joint debate encompasses four reports supposedly compiled to outline better regulation in the EU. That is surely a contradiction in terms! Despite the many words written and spoken on this topic, the crux of this issue has been entirely overlooked. Mr Doorn's report best sums up the blinkered stance taken towards this notion of better regulation. After all, that report states that the Commission's action programme to reduce administrative burdens by 25% by 2012 'cannot [...] be equated to a deregulation, nor lead to a change in the policy objectives and level of ambition contained in Community legislation'. Therefore, not one single report considers the possibility that less regulation – or, even better, no legislation – is what is required.

This concept will not be grasped by this talking shop simply because, if this logic were pursued, then Euroland would be forced to admit what we have known for many years, which is that the EU is bad news for business.

**Roger Helmer (NI).** - Mr President, as we debate better regulation, we should first recall the scale of the problem. No one imagines you can run a modern economy without regulation but, equally, excessive regulation can be hugely damaging, and the Commission's own figures prove it. In an interview with the *Financial Times* last year, Commission Vice-President Verheugen said that he had made a new estimate of the annual cost of regulation to the EU economies, and that it amounted to an extraordinary EUR 600 billion! That is around 5.5% of the EU's GDP.

But what about the admitted trade benefits of the single market? Here again we can turn to the Commission's figures. The Commission has estimated the trade benefits at EUR 160 billion a year. In other words, the cost of EU regulation exceeds the benefits of the single market by more than three times. The EU's regulatory system is making us all poorer and damaging our competitiveness in the face of globalisation.

My fear is that all the talk of better regulation is coded language for 'more of the same'. We do not need better regulation, we need less regulation.

I have a practical proposal: let us agree to pass no new legislation in the next parliamentary term. Instead, let us unleash the full power of the EU institutions on the task of deregulation. Let us do the impact assessments, let us consult with industry and then let us dismantle the legislation which is holding us back.

**President.** – Thank you, Mr Helmer. As far as I am aware, when I got up this morning I was still female!

**Georgios Papastamkos (PPE-DE).** – (EL) Mr President, I should like to focus on the amendments that I have submitted to the Committee on Constitutional Affairs and that have been incorporated into the text of the Committee's opinion on the use of 'soft law'.

'Soft' or 'permissive' law is a widely accepted dialogue-based form of European common regulatory policy involving coordination, cooperation, negotiation and hierarchy. My main observation is that soft-law instruments, which do not take on a legally binding nature but nevertheless produce certain indirect legal results, have proven adequate for the effective regulation of certain areas of Community activity – within

the framework of the Community treaties, of course, and subject to the requirements laid down in those treaties.

I am also of the opinion that soft-law instruments should be used as preparatory instruments for binding legislative acts. They are superseded when formal legislative acts come into force, and they contribute to the interpretation and enforcement of Community legislation.

However, I should like to emphasise that excessive recourse to soft-law instruments would signal a change of the single European Community model into a traditional international organisation. Soft law should not be a substitute where it is essential to adopt binding Community legislation – subject, of course, to the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

As I have stressed in one of my adopted amendments, the Commission should make a special effort to guarantee transparency, visibility and public accountability in the procedure for approving non-binding Community acts, and guarantee increased use of impact assessment in the decision-making process.

**Silvia-Adriana Țicău (PSE).** - (RO) Madam President, Commissioner, the Spring European Council proposed to reduce Community and national bureaucracy by 25% by 2012. Member States should develop a plan for quantifying and reducing administrative costs, by avoiding overregulation in transposing Community legislation into national law. To ensure better regulation, the proposals for simplifying legislation, reducing the number of normative acts and retaining only the very necessary regulations should have priority. Non-mandatory legislative (soft law) instruments should be developed with the cooperation of democratic institutions, used very carefully but without replacing the Community law, when needed. For legislation that is easy to understand and apply, impact studies and consultation of the relevant parties are essential, especially with regard to the social impact of the legislative proposals. Information technology should be used in order to reduce administrative costs and to ensure the transparency of the legislative process. The future European Treaty will enable European Union citizens, by means of the national parliaments, to exercise scrutiny over observance of the principle of subsidiarity within the context of legislative proposals.

**Marek Aleksander Czarnecki (UEN).** - (PL) Madam President, *dura lex, sed lex* is a Latin maxim that most lawyers are probably very familiar with. It translates as hard law but law nonetheless. Today we are focusing on soft law, which identifies a particular approach, but is not a legally binding act. It is an expression of political declarations, resolutions, Council declarations, Presidency conclusions, but such provisions are not binding. Soft law may also be applied by the European Court for the interpretation of provisions, however. It is therefore a type of law, although the Court states that it is not intended to have a legally binding effect even in relation to the persons to whom it is applied. In practice, however, the national courts are required to take account of recommendations when resolving disputes. The former assist in interpretation of national law adopted, guaranteeing its implementation and supplementing binding Community provisions.

The rapporteur has provided a very critical analysis of non-binding legal provisions. In particular, their implementation by the Commission is deemed inappropriate. The rapporteur emphasises that in a situation in which the Community has legislative authority it would be appropriate for a body such as Council or the Parliament to adopt an act, taking account of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. I agree with the rapporteur that the only way to guarantee the possibility of applying and implementing the law is by adopting provisions in the framework of institutional procedures laid down in the Treaty.

**Nils Lundgren (IND/DEM).** - (SV) Madam President, as the basis for cooperation within the EU the Member States have signed several treaties laying down the basic rules governing what the EU is and what the EU must do. This is called primary law and the EU institutions are not permitted to take decisions which are not based on primary law.

I wish to draw the Chamber's attention to the resolution by the rapporteur Manuel Medina Ortega in which he urges the Commission to avoid the expression of soft law. As we all know, soft law is non-legally binding documents presented by the Commission to clarify directives in different policy areas. It is fortunate, not regrettable as Mr Ortega puts it, that the Member States have voting powers in areas where full harmonisation of the law is merely an impossible dream of the federalists. Community law is binding only in areas where the Member States themselves have delegated decision-making rights to the Community.

**Tadeusz Zwiefka (PPE-DE).** - (PL) Madam President, I welcomed the fact that, for the first time, initiatives concerning simplification of legislation have been included in the Commission's work and legislative programme for the current year. A better regulatory environment and clear and effective legislation are

essential conditions for ensuring better implementation of the law. This will in turn impact on the rate of economic growth and job creation, thus making a valuable contribution to the success of the Lisbon Strategy.

It should also be borne in mind that in many cases, the way in which Community legislation has been established to date has resulted in the emergence of a notion of a remote bureaucratic structure amongst citizens of the Member States. This structure has been perceived as being uninterested in resolving the problems experienced by ordinary people or in making their lives easier, a situation which the Eurosceptics are busy exploiting.

Clearly, simplification cannot be confined to the European level. It must also take place at national level, so that the benefits of Community simplification are not squandered due to national regulations. I strongly support the calls to the European Commission urging it to monitor this process at national level too.

On its own, however, simplifying legislation does not guarantee that it will be of a better quality. We need to determine whether so-called soft law does represent an effective instrument in the context of the Community. We are all aware that the current model of soft law imposes the requirement to undertake transposition into the national systems. Not only is this linked to higher costs, but it also has a significant impact on the clarity and effectiveness of legislation precisely at national level.

In addition, this leads to serious problems in the area of case-law, as it increases waiting time because of the need to address prejudicial questions to the European Court of Justice. I agree with the statement that so-called soft law all too often amounts to an ambiguous and ineffective instrument that can have a negative impact on Community legislation and the institutional balance. It should not be used as a substitute for desirable but unadopted legislation.

An effective system of assessment of the impact of legal acts is a *sine qua non* for ensuring high quality and effective Community or national legislation. I believe much still remains to be done in this area, and I would like to take the opportunity provided by this debate to emphasise how important it is for the institution charged with carrying out impact assessments to be entirely independent.

Better law-making must also mean the involvement of the European Parliament both in interinstitutional debate and as a co-legislator.

**Andrzej Jan Szejna (PSE).** - (PL) Madam President, I welcome the fact that we are paying increasing attention to the quality of appropriate European Community legislation. The latter is the subject of scrutiny in terms of its transparency, accessibility and effectiveness. It should, however, be borne in mind that better law-making includes all aspects of the legislative process, from the initial concept through to its introduction and implementation. Accordingly, when discussing better regulation we should also consider every level of administration. The administrative structure must not be allowed to grow unnecessarily, with all the burdens that implies.

This applies not only to the European administration but also to the administration at Member State level. Accordingly, both the European Union and the Member States should launch an ambitious strategy to reduce administrative burdens, bearing in mind that such burdens arise out of both European and national legislation. It is incumbent on the Member States, however, to devise and implement programmes to simplify administrative actions and provide more systematic assessment of the social and economic effects of implementing Community legislation.

#### IN THE CHAIR: MR BIELAN

*Vice-President*

**Diana Wallis, on behalf of the ALDE Group.** – Mr President, I did not think I was going to get to make this speech, I thought I would have to send it to you later, but I very much wanted to participate on behalf of my group. Clearly, these are four very important reports that we have been discussing on better law-making. Although it is rare, I have to say that I have some sympathy with our colleagues from the right of the House when they say that four reports on better law-making is a bit of a blockbuster, is it not? Could we not perhaps have had one clear, simple report?

I would like to concentrate my remarks on the issue of soft law and Mr Medina Ortega's report. Soft law is a worry. It can be a very useful process to use soft law but it can also lead to fuzziness, unclarity and difficulties. Mr Medina Ortega tries to be very clear in his report and I applaud that, but there will always be a wish amongst legislators to use, as it were, alternative regulatory methods other than black letter law.

We have to admit that the state cannot do everything, but if we admit that, we also have to be very clear about the dangers of using soft law. First of all, soft law, as many of my colleagues in the Committee on Legal Affairs have already said, has a propensity to bypass the legislator, to bypass Parliament, to bypass democracy – and that is entirely unacceptable. We have to be aware of this danger and make sure that it does not happen. We have seen one very clear example with a very important project to do with European contract law, which absolutely should be discussed and discussed politically, but because of the way in which it was dealt with it came before us as a soft law instrument.

There is also a further difficulty when we use soft or alternative methods to do with justice and access to justice. If we use alternative methods – we often talk about alternative dispute resolution systems at European level – these, again, are not backed by a state structure. A constituent of mine recently returned from a holiday in another EU country. He had lost out on car rental and was forced to use an alternative system, and the car hire company would not participate. That is when soft systems not backed by black letter law fail our citizens and do not deliver justice.

If we want an EU that delivers justice both in the law we make and the way it is accessible through the courts, we have to be very careful about soft law and make sure that it is still backed in some way by the state.

**Günter Verheugen**, *Vice-President of the Commission*. – (DE) Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, I am most grateful for the broad consensus which has emerged in this debate, but I would like to clarify a few points. First of all, better regulation is not the same as deregulation. I must refute that very firmly. This is not a Deregulation Commission: as I have said, European integration is based on the law, not on the abolition of law. Better regulation is precisely what the name says: it aims to improve regulation, and to make it more modern, simpler, more transparent and above all more responsive to the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises. We often subject them to the same burdens as major corporations, and that is unfair.

In particular, I would like to confirm what Mrs Frassoni has said: it is not about lowering standards. If you look at the many initiatives proposed by the Commission so far, you will see that there is not a single case in which the Commission has proposed lowering a standard or weakening the level of European integration that has been achieved. The aim is only ever to achieve the objectives which you – the European Parliament – regard as politically necessary, but to do so by simpler, more up-to-date and cheaper means. I would like to make that very clear.

There seems to be a great deal of confusion surrounding the statistics. I am really quite surprised. Let me try and clarify. As regards simplification, this is an ongoing programme which is being constantly enhanced. The Commission is currently working on 143 simplification initiatives of which around half have already been adopted; 67 initiatives have already been adopted. These initiatives naturally cover a large number of basic acts with subsequent regulation. So if we say that we have 143 simplification initiatives, this means that several thousand acts are affected. Here, the aim is what I have described: to review the existing legislation and determine whether it is still appropriate for today. It is quite clear, after all, that after around 50 years of European integration, this has to be done.

On the issue of costs, it is a rather different matter. Mr Helmer's frequent repetition of his assertions does not make them correct. I assume that he is not here, but I would like to make that clear once and for all. Administrative burdens for companies are defined as costs incurred by European companies as a result of their record-keeping, and statistical and information obligations, and as a result of European, national or regional legislation. They amount to 3.5% of Europe's gross national product in total, although this covers all three levels: European, national and regional. We already have a breakdown of where these costs arise: around 35% of them are directly attributable to European legislation, 15% come from the transposition of European legislation into national law, and the rest – 50% – arise purely at national level.

It is of course quite incorrect to assert, as Mr Helmer does, that the EU costs the economy EUR 350 billion and the internal market does not bring that many benefits, so the cost of EU regulation exceeds the benefits of the single market. With respect, that is sleight of hand and is targeted at people's ignorance; it ignores the fact, for example, that if we did not have EU law, we would still have national law, even in the United Kingdom, and indeed in particularly large quantities, as we know. It would certainly be more expensive.

Let me give you one example of how much scope for massive simplification and savings potential is afforded by European legislation. In Europe we had 1 400 different pieces of technical legislation on wireless systems in 27 countries. That means that a company in the United Kingdom which produced specific wireless systems had to be familiar with 1 400 items of national legislation. In line with the Commission's proposal, this Parliament adopted legislation which simplified these 1 400 provisions and turned them into one single



item of legislation. You could work out the precise savings that this entailed for companies, but the overall message is clear.

The 25% reduction is absolutely achievable. With the proposal, we have supplied you with the 10 fast-track actions to show you that, technically speaking, it is fairly straightforward. All you have to do is look through the existing regulations to see which statistical, information and record-keeping obligations exist and whether we actually still need them to this extent, based on current practice. In many cases, we find that they are not needed at all to the same extent, or that modern information and communications technologies are making it all very much easier.

We will achieve this 25%, and this will lead to a productivity gain for the European economy of 1.5% of GNP. This naturally has a macroeconomic dimension, for there are not many economic programmes in the European Union which have a positive economic effect of 1.5%. I would just like to say in passing that if everything goes well, we will also achieve a very high growth effect if the new transatlantic cooperation – removal of trade barriers in transatlantic trade – is brought to a successful conclusion.

We felt that it was important to provide you with this clarification so that we know what we are talking about. I underscore everything that has been said here in regard to impact assessment. This is the be-all and end-all and the Commission's rule is this: no new proposal without a comprehensive impact assessment, and no new proposal without an impact assessment which has been scrutinised by the Impact Assessment Board. If this rule is occasionally infringed, the European Parliament has the absolute right, in my view – indeed, if not a duty – to draw critical attention to it. Without impact assessment, the legislator is not in a position to assess the practical outcomes of its action.

Even if an impact assessment reveals that a new proposal will entail costs for the economy or for citizens, this does not necessarily mean that the measure will be shelved, for there are some things which are more important than costs. When it is a matter of protecting our environment, combating climate change, reducing our dependency on fossil fuels or promoting the health of our citizens, it is not about costs. In such cases, we have to do what is necessary. Nonetheless, the Commission feels obliged to fully inform Parliament about the social, environmental and economic consequences of any new proposal. That is why impact assessment is so important.

We will look very carefully at the proposals which have been made here. The most important point which has been made several times in this debate is something which I fully endorse: all this can only be successful if it is a community project. It will not succeed if we view it as a conflict between the institutions. It will only work if all three institutions – Parliament, the Council and the Commission – jointly support it and make it their priority. That is the only way for this endeavour to succeed.

**President.** – The debate is closed.

The vote will take place on Tuesday.

## **18. EURES activity report 2004-2005: Towards a single European labour market (debate)**

**President.** – The next item is the oral question (<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=OQ&reference=O-2007-0038&language=PL> – B6-0136/2007) to the Commission by Mr Andersson, on behalf of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, on the EURES activity report 2005-2005: Towards a single European labour market.

**Jan Andersson (PSE), author.** – (SV) Mr President, earlier we talked about the importance of mobility for growth and employment in Europe. Then we were talking about mobility for workers who undertake further training, look for new jobs in their own country, change professions through further training and about geographical mobility within countries, but also cross-border geographical mobility. If we look round Europe we can see that it is important for growth. Some of the countries that have the highest mobility also have the highest growth and employment in Europe. This is very important.

What is the situation in Europe? Well, the situation differs quite considerably from one country to the next, but at the same time we can see improvements. We have seen improvements in recent years. I come from a border region between two Scandinavian countries where mobility was not very extensive to begin with, but it has increased sharply in recent years. It is important for growth and employment that people on one

side of a national border can move over to the other side of the border. Perhaps they could not find a job at first but found work on the other side of the border. This increases growth in the entire region and is good in the long term.

We also have many obstacles. I have seen this in this work. There are obstacles in different social security systems, taxes and so forth, and in the lack of information. As regards information on this subject, we have our cooperation on employment services, the EURES cooperation. EURES cooperation has developed in recent years. Partly with the special limits, but perhaps above all through its portal, which individual citizens can access to find information on what jobs are available, but also on the social security situation. What is the situation as far as taxes are concerned? What do I need to do if I am going to cross a border?

In the most recent budget in the European Parliament we pushed through an increase of EUR 2 million for EURES cooperation. That is why we are tabling the oral question and the resolution. We can see a number of needs that exist with a view to increasing mobility further. In our oral question we focus on nationals from third countries. It looks to the future. We know that Europe needs more workers, not least nationals from third countries. They already exist and we should increase cooperation – in particular with neighbouring countries that we have neighbourhood cooperation with – and create greater opportunities for them to obtain relevant information on the employment situation, social security schemes and taxes.

The second part relates to seasonal workers. There have been seasonal workers in the Union for a long time and seasonal workers also need better information on the situation, social benefits, and the rules that apply. This can be obtained from the EURES portal.

Lastly, I would also like to raise the question of whether the Commission has ideas about improving mobility in other respects. We had a big discussion on transitional rules and mobility between new Member States and old Member States. There are still a number of countries in the EU that are applying the transitional rules. I hope that this period will be as short as possible and that we will soon be able fully to apply free mobility so that all the transitional provisions disappear. It is also important for us to try to look around and see what the situation will be in the event of greater mobility for the countries that have not applied any transitional rules because mobility is not particularly extensive. It is not extensive and there are probably reasons in general to improve information. If hopefully the transitional provisions now disappear, we must also improve information for individual workers on job vacancies and on what is needed, what must be contributed in terms of social security, taxes and so forth.

These are the questions we have put to the Commission. I know that the Commission has the same aims as the European Parliament, but what is the Commission planning to do?

**Vladimír Špidla**, *Member of the Commission*. – (CS) Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, before answering each of the questions you have asked, I would like to remind you what the EURES system is.

It is a system, a unique system, whose great advantage lies in combining a network comprising over 800 qualified advisers with an efficient portal, facilitating easy data access and interactive data exchange.

Since 2006 the EURES portal has offered easy access to all of the job offers in the European Union as well as to the national public employment services in the countries belonging to the European Economic Area in 25 European languages. On average the portal offers access to more than 1 200 000 offers. At the same time the EURES advisers are on hand to help workers and their families who are planning to make use of the opportunities that mobility offers.

I would now like to answer your questions one by one.

I will start with your first question concerning the possible expansion of EURES to third-country nationals.

As you know, EURES was originally introduced to benefit the citizens of the European Economic Area by helping them to find work outside their own countries and thus increase mobility. At present the Commission is planning to make the EURES system accessible to workers from other countries as well: this will not only meet their expectations but also benefit the Union. In view of the ageing population and demographic decrease in Europe we must be ready for shortages in the European workforce in the near future, which will affect key sectors of our economy and our lifestyle. Apart from that, the EURES system could also contribute to a more global solution to the problem of migration from third countries.

As a result, a new direction was added to the general EURES principles for the period 2007-2010, which provide for the possibility of widening the scope of information offered through the EURES network to cater for the needs of workers from third countries.

Following the Commission's action plan on legal migration we now want to analyse in detail the possibilities of expanding the EURES system in that direction. In the initial phase we could consider supplementing the existing sections providing information on 'Living and working conditions' with information tailored to the needs of citizens from third countries who want to enter the European market, and provide that information in the languages of those countries as well.

Your second question concerns the inclusion of seasonal and short-term temporary job offers in the EURES system. It is true that the initial analyses that were carried out for the EURES system did not indicate the need and level of demand for short-term work abroad. The statistics at our disposal covered only the minimum span of one year and the demand for seasonal work or work experience and study placements was not taken into account.

However, following the recommendation of the European Parliament on the increase of the EURES budget for 2007, research was carried out within the system to determine the need for, and feasibility of, introducing such a service. The reaction of a number of countries was very positive. Some partners had already experienced this type of service in the areas of tourism, building and agriculture. In future, when plans for further development of the EURES system are being developed, the possibility of extending this service will be automatically considered.

As far as your third question is concerned, the Commission also believes that both professional and geographical mobility can play a positive role in improving how the European labour market works, and therefore it is important to support and enhance that mobility.

To that end, the Commission is developing an action plan based on the results of the European Year of Workers' Mobility 2006, which aims to increase mobility within the European labour market and do away with the main obstacles to its further development.

This action plan will recommend reinforcing the role of EURES, making it the main instrument for supporting worker mobility throughout the European Union and increasing awareness of it. It will have three main objectives:

1. enhancing the strategic dimension of EURES by reinforcing its analytical potential as regards mobility flows and changes in the European labour market;
2. enhancing the quality of its services by offering mobile workers and their families a more comprehensive service;
3. increasing its operational coverage by reinforcing its relations with other providers of similar services – or with the private sector – and gradually opening up its activities to workers from other parts of the world, as I already explained in my answer to your first question.

Your fourth and final question concerns the EURES cross-border projects and their role in helping the Member States to do away with temporary measures.

Dealing with the specific problems that arise in cross-border relations has always been an important priority for EURES. We now have as many as 20 cross-border cooperation projects, the latest being the projects between the Czech Republic and Germany and between Slovakia and Hungary. Apart from that, 14 feasibility studies are being conducted at the moment with a view to identifying new projects and services, be they between the 'new' Member States or between the 'old' and the 'new' Member States.

However, ladies and gentlemen, I believe that the time has come to abandon the idea of 'old' and 'new' states: in a certain sense Spain is undoubtedly a new state, and so is Greece, and I could go on. I wonder how much longer we are going to use this kind of classification for equal Member States of the European Union.

In any case, 14 feasibility studies are being carried out with a view to identifying new projects. These are all practical projects designed to facilitate citizens – employers and cross-border workers – in their everyday lives. The partners could consist of trade unions, employers organisations, public employment services or any other participants working at a local or regional level. Through these projects we hope to facilitate the exchange of workers between the partner states and encourage them to take the necessary steps concerning temporary measures.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to conclude by pointing out another important aspect of the EURES work, and that is limiting the possibility of social dumping. It is obvious that people who are well informed when they arrive in another country are in a much stronger position than those who lack that information. In this regard, too, EURES is a unique and very efficient tool.

**Philip Bushill-Matthews**, *on behalf of the PPE-DE Group*. – Mr President, may I start by saying that I agree substantially with the comments from my colleague, Mr Andersson, on the opposite side of the House, but I would ask that this would not be regarded as a precedent for future occasions. It is worth recording that there was substantial support for this resolution in committee. We, as a group, are not tabling any amendments to this resolution and I hope that colleagues from all political parties and all nationalities will support something that is worthy of support, which is the principle that the EU is about people and about providing more opportunities for more people, and EURES has a particular role to play in fulfilling this concept.

However, I have two subsidiary questions which the Commissioner could either answer in his follow-up remarks or by letter. They are two small points, but hopefully not insignificant.

One concerns the actual use of the portal. If you key in 'job mobility in Europe' you go straight to the EURES portal, which is a very good portal and easy to navigate. However, in order to get there you must have the key words 'job mobility'. If you simply key in 'jobs in Europe', you get a whole list of other portals, such as Eurojobs, Jobpilot, Topjobs, Careers in Europe, etc. They may be very worthy, but the key is to connect into EURES. Therefore, my question is: can anything more be done to make certain that the EURES portal is more widely available to those individuals who do not necessarily go through job search centres, but just want to access the net themselves.

My second point is that I see that one of the aspects of EURES – which I also applaud – is the subportal about life-long learning and there is a portal within that called PLOTEUS. I was intrigued to hear about PLOTEUS because this, for the benefit of colleagues who may, like me, have been ignorant until today, is the portal on learning opportunities throughout space. Wow, this is really a *big* endeavour, not just in Europe but throughout space! I was looking at this because, whilst a lot of the mobility issues are to do with giving opportunities to our friends and colleagues in Eastern and Central Europe to move west, I also believe more attention should be paid to opportunities from the west to move to Eastern and Central Europe. One of the blockages – and I speak clearly as an Englishman – is language learning and adaptability to languages, and anything that the PLOTEUS project can do to encourage language learning is, and I hope the Commissioner will agree, a very important part of job mobility.

What I am saying in both these points about PLOTEUS and access to the net is: by all means think about opportunities in space, but bring this portal down to earth so that it connects with real people on more occasions.

**Stephen Hughes**, *on behalf of the PSE Group*. – Mr President, EURES has tremendous potential, but much of that potential has yet to be realised. It still has a number of limitations. Our question says that the portal should become a one-stop-shop for workers' geographic and occupational mobility, but we should be honest in accepting that it has a long way to go before it could become such a thing. It should, however, be possible to build such a one-stop-shop in this advanced electronic age.

Workers planning a move across the EU in pursuit of work need access to detailed and localised knowledge to give them the confidence to move with their families – detailed information right down to the level, for example, of schools to be found in a particular locality, the performance of those schools, student numbers and vacancies. The same applies to healthcare, housing and a host of other issues.

The portal includes information under these headings, but it is of a very general nature and gives only a brief national snapshot. It might seem like a huge task to build detailed and localised information into the portal, but that is not necessarily the case. A lot of this detailed information already exists on the websites of local authorities, health authorities, local education authorities and government departments. Web links to these sites can be embedded in the portal to take users requiring more detailed information to those sites.

Increasingly, information being made available at local level is also held in a range of languages. In my own area, for example, we have everything from information on how to register to vote to finding accommodation available in Polish and a range of other languages.

Finally, that information is often held in a range of languages of third countries, which ties in with the point addressed by the Commissioner. Inward migration from third countries cannot solve the difficulties

demographic change poses for the EU, but it can help. I have therefore been pleased to hear what he said about the plans to equip EURES to play an important part in that process.

**Danutė Budreikaitė**, *on behalf of the ALDE Group*. – (LT) Free movement of workers is one of the four conditions essential for the existence and successful functioning of the EU Single Market. The single labour market, which is not yet developed, would enable jobseekers to gain new skills and experience and would provide them with an opportunity to choose a job and realise their skills, and employers would be able to choose from a larger number of employees in order to secure the specialists required. The EURES (European Employment Services) network is an instrument aimed at creating a single labour market by facilitating the movement of workers in the EU, the countries of the European Economic Area and Switzerland (I will not mention third countries here). National employment services, trade unions, employers' organisations and regional and local authorities cooperate in the network. Their activity is coordinated by the European Commission. The role of the EURES network is to inform, advise and assist potentially mobile workers on opportunities to work abroad and on the living, working and studying conditions in the countries of the European Economic Area and to help employers wishing to recruit workers from other countries.

The EURES portal was launched in 2006 and offers one million job vacancies across Europe. To date, 8 000 employers and 184 000 jobseekers have registered on the portal. Although the right of free movement while seeking to live and work abroad is one of the basic rights of European citizens established in the Treaty of Rome, many of the old Member States still apply transitional periods for the countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. Germany is planning to extend the transitional period for opening the labour market until 2011 owing to the high level of unemployment in the country. Some sources of information state that we are facing a shortage of labour in the EU but others report a high level of unemployment. There are one million job vacancies on the EURES portal, but at the same time free movement of labour is restricted. How effective is EURES? I will give the example of my country, Lithuania. According to official statistics, 34 000 workers left Lithuania within four years, but only 405 did so within two and a half years with the assistance of EURES services. The media often present staggering information about the slavery of migrants in Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom, where workers from the new countries encounter inhuman working and living conditions. Is this not a shortcoming of the EURES system? People do not receive sufficient information about working and living conditions and do not know where to turn when they encounter problems. Activities in 2006 indicated that new obstacles to the free movement of labour have emerged; these are practical problems, accommodation, language, employment for a partner or spouse and psychological difficulties while adapting to a new country and planning to return home. It is gratifying that the Commission will start implementing an action plan for mobility in 2007, which will help to solve the problems that have arisen. An information system on geographic and professional mobility based on the one-stop-shop principle would also contribute to this.

**Ryszard Czarnecki**, *on behalf of the UEN Group*. – (PL) Mr President, I promise that unlike Mr Bushill-Matthews, the previous speaker, I shall not speak about cyberspace and the opportunities that navigating around it could open up for the citizens of Central and Eastern Europe.

The draft resolution is full of praise for EURES, the European Employment Service. We should be aware, however, that for some observers EURES is an example of overgrown European bureaucracy. As my fellow Member from Lithuania pointed out just now, barely 8% of Lithuanians who went abroad to work used the instruments offered by EURES. This amounts to very few indeed.

Perhaps this is not actually a case of overgrown bureaucracy, but the matter would be much more straightforward if the European labour market were eventually fully liberalised. Europeans would then be able to go job-hunting in the normal manner, and would not necessarily use EURES.

Of course all methods should be supported, including official information about vacant jobs for seasonal or temporary workers. This should concern citizens of the Member States of the Union in the first instance. Citizens of third countries should come second, including nationals of countries working with the Union in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy.

Two years and two months ago, as we adopted the guidelines on employment policy in the Member States we emphasised the need to remove all obstacles to the free movement of workers in Europe as envisaged by the Treaties. It is unfortunate that Germany, Austria and certain other Member States failed to heed that appeal and still retain barriers preventing access to the labour market. This is contrary to the fundamental freedoms on which the European Union is based, as my fellow Member stated. Free access will eventually

come about, but much time will have been wasted in the interim. We should discuss general solutions *hic et nunc*, not half-measures.

**Elisabeth Schroedter**, *on behalf of the Verts/ALE Group.* – (DE) Mr President, my fellow Members are absolutely correct to say that EURES is creating a European success story. Without the EURES network, geographical and occupational mobility in Europe would not be possible to the extent that it is today and would not be available to workers who know their rights and are therefore able to exercise them. The European Union's fourth freedom would only exist on paper if EURES did not exist.

Therefore, I do not understand, Commissioner, why you are not showing more commitment in order to improve EURES, in other words, creating more centres and improving quality, e.g. through best practice models in the border regions. Really, they should be shooting out of the ground like mushrooms in order to pursue your objectives in the European Year of Workers' Mobility and increase geographical mobility in Europe. More commitment really is needed here. Regions affected by a shortage of skilled workers would benefit particularly if mobility were made easier in Europe. However, it is of course the Member States, first and foremost – and the Council is notable for its absence here yet again – which are applying the brakes.

Mutual recognition of social security systems still has a very long way to go before it achieves the level which would enable workers to take up employment in another Member State without forfeiting some of their social security. It is even more difficult for workers in Member States – such as my own country – which still insist on restricting mobility for a transitional period. In these countries, mobility takes place in illegal and fragile employment conditions; the black market determines wages and security. However, the battle against social dumping can only take place on the basis of legal mobility.

For that reason, I am mystified as to why governments such as Germany's on the one hand make the shortage of skilled workers a hot topic, but on the other, do not have the courage to allow people from the Eastern Europe countries to exercise their freedom of movement, thereby also defusing finally the sometimes absurd situation at the borders. I also appeal to the social partners to do more for mobility in the various countries and to impose public controls to bring to light the black sheep and stop them from profiting from social dumping.

**Derek Roland Clark**, *on behalf of the IND/DEM Group.* – Mr President, Europe comprises a widely diverse geography, terrain and climate, giving rise to a wide variety of lifestyles and economies. In particular, there has always been a variety of working practices, and labour laws have developed differently. Different people work in different ways. Variety is the spice of life. You tamper with this at your peril, for it is at the heart of full employment and of labour laws.

The Employment Committee is properly known as the Employment and Social Affairs Committee, and surely the greatest social benefit of all both for the individual and for society is for people to have jobs. In April 2005, Germany had 10% unemployment, while the UK figure was 4.5%, but then the UK has taken less of the EU's labour laws. Many Eastern European countries have high unemployment rates. They have made progress, they have improved somewhat, but the last thing they want is to exchange the Soviet command economy run by the unelected commissars for the centralised rulings of the unelected EU Commissioners.

Europe does not need the EU to impose a common set of labour laws on all. A straitjacket like that can only result in rising unemployment, leading to the kind of social unrest we have seen before. I hope none of us wants to see that again.

**Csaba Óry (PPE-DE).** - (HU) There has been much talk about growth in geographic and occupational mobility within the Union as a key factor in reducing unemployment and increasing economic competitiveness.

The 27-Member Union has a very large labour reserve, yet because of the unequal regional division of jobs available it cannot provide employment opportunities for a significant proportion of career-starters and employees over the age of 50. As a result the acceleration of the inward migration of workers arriving in several Member States from third countries, even though there is a suitable and skilled workforce available within the Union, is now an urgent issue.

The EURES network plays an outstanding role in the relationship between supply and demand but it is unfortunate that it has not, even yet, been given the appropriate support from the EU resources available for development purposes. It is very clear: I have heard that there are 700 EURES advisors, while Mr Špidla mentioned 800 – if we consider this number in relation to 20 million citizens unable to find a job in the 27

Member States, then this is obviously a trifling figure in comparison. Only 25-26 advisors per country, a mere drop in the ocean, and in no way sufficient for the task in hand.

Another issue I see as problematical is that while information on job-seekers is accessible on the portal, there is much less information on companies providing job opportunities. There is a total of 11 000 companies represented on EURES, according to the latest information. There needs to be a much bigger information campaign if the economic players are to be more involved than at present. I feel that the development of the EURES network and portal and the stimulus for it is a common European interest and so I would urge that the proposals be adopted.

**Proinsias De Rossa (PSE).** - Mr President, there is no doubt that the EURES programme is very important and is working well, but it needs to be improved.

I want to deal with a specific issue relating to mobility, which we all agree is necessary and is good for Europe. The problem I refer to specifically is that of EU citizens who come to Ireland and have a spouse who is not originally from an EU country.

In the last number of weeks, the Irish Government has issued deportation orders for 120 such spouses. I know that many more have been informed by the Irish authorities that their application for residency has been suspended pending the outcome of a court case, which is not likely to happen until 2009. This is clearly an obstacle to mobility in Europe for those European Union citizens who want to move to Ireland to take up the work that is available there, and who find they are restricted because they are married to non-EU citizens.

It seems to me that this is unfair to those who might want to move, but it is doubly unfair to those who have already moved and are living – in some cases for a long time – in Ireland with their spouses and who are now being deported. I would urge the Commissioner to make contact as a matter of urgency with the Irish Minister and urge him to withdraw the deportation orders and to allocate interim residency to the families concerned and to end the uncertainty that they currently face with regard to their future.

If we are serious about mobility in Europe, then these kinds of issues should not arise. I am convinced that the current Irish law that is operating in this regard is in breach of the European Union Directive of 2004 on mobility and on residency and also in breach of European Union anti-discrimination laws, because this is being applied only to the spouses of non-Irish EU citizens. These are two serious issues, and I would urge the Commissioner to make immediate and urgent representations to the Irish authorities, specifically Minister Brian Lenihan, to have this matter resolved without delay.

**Zbigniew Krzysztof Kuźmiuk (UEN).** - (PL) Mr President, I should like to draw attention to two issues in the course of this debate. Firstly, it is necessary to fully implement one of the fundamental freedoms underpinning the European single market, namely free movement of the labour force. In the case of workers from the new Member States, this freedom is being severely restricted, for instance by Germany and Austria. Clearly, this situation is detrimental to the mobility of workers across the territory of the European Union.

Secondly, strong support is needed, especially for new Member States, in order to bring about an increase in the employment rates in those countries. For example, in my country, Poland, the rate is 51% for men and barely 46% for women. By way of comparison, in the United States and the Scandinavian countries, for example, these indicators already exceed 70%.

**Gunnar Hökmark (PPE-DE).** - Mr President, I think there is widespread understanding of the importance of increased mobility and all the experiences are extremely good regarding workers, researchers – you can look everywhere. The success is very much in the mobility and European cooperation and we know it is important for the quality of employment, for the efficiency of labour markets, we know it is truly a European idea and we also know it is of utmost importance for the opportunities of the individual. But, having said that, we are still facing a number of obstacles.

It is important to support EURES and to ensure that it can do a good job. But at the same time we must ensure that the obstacles, for example the transition rules, are removed as soon as possible, because it is a paradox that one side tries to increase mobility and the other side accepts that mobility is hindered.

The second thing that I think is important to say in this respect is that even when we remove these obstacles we still have too little mobility. That goes for our domestic labour market as well as across borders. I think that EURES could be used not only in order to inform and improve the security for those who would like to move to another country and another labour market, as Mr Andersson pointed out here earlier today, but

it could also be used in order to inform all the decision-making institutions of the remaining obstacles we have in the European labour markets because the gap between vision and theory on the one hand and the reality is quite big. And I think EURES could have an information role in two ways: to those who are trying to move to other labour markets but also to all of us and the Member States in order to make it much easier in reality to move. That is the challenge that we could discuss further here tonight.

**Vladimír Špidla**, *Member of the Commission*. – (CS) Ladies and gentlemen, I think that the debate has clearly shown that EURES is a good tool, which has a function and is useful: it genuinely contributes to the free movement of the labour force, helping mobility, helping people to find out about the labour market across the European Union and find out about their rights.

On the other hand, and this was also highlighted in the debate, we have not reached any perfect or definitive situation and it is necessary to continue to develop EURES further.

There were some issues raised in the debate that I will not comment on individually at this time because they are of a very specific and organisational nature, and I believe that each and every one of them is worthy of an expert assessment as to its merit.

What emerges clearly from the debate is the fact that the Commission's general idea of developing this portal and the European Parliament's general vision of the purpose and development of this portal are more or less identical and afford us the opportunity of truly efficient and beneficial long-term cooperation and mutual inspiration.

I would also like to point out that there were many ideas voiced here that went beyond the scope of this parliamentary question, for example the issue of national legislation, but these are questions that I have certainly noted and I will give them further consideration.

## **19. Agenda for next sitting: see Minutes**

## **20. Closure of sitting**

*(The sitting was closed at 9.45 p.m.)*