

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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President of the European Commission

Introductory statement by President Barroso on Ukraine

European Parliament Plenary debate
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Mr. President,

Honourable members,

Very serious concerns remain over the situation in Ukraine. And I would like to start by saying how grateful we are for the constant attention that this Parliament has been giving to this most important crisis. I know that the Parliament, as an institution, and many of you in this room have been deploying considerable energy and time to help find a solution. And I hope that we can put all our efforts along the same lines to support Ukraine, a European country.

Ukraine was also subject of an extraordinary meeting of Heads of State and Government last week, also attended partly by the Ukrainian Prime-Minister Yatseniuk. Today I want to share with you the results of that meeting, and specifically what the European Commission has been doing to support Ukraine in these very challenging times, not only supporting the legitimate aspirations of the Ukrainians but also giving our best for regional and international peace.

The developments which started with the people of Ukraine expressing a clear wish to take their future into their own hands, have called for a robust and united European response. The present situation directly challenges us in many ways and forms. It challenges our conscience as individuals. It challenges our unity as Europeans. It challenges our policies as decision makers. And it challenges some of the values that we hold dear, such as peace and democracy.

This is, in a way, a test of our Union. And the outcome of the current situation will greatly impact in the geopolitical configuration of our continent for the years to come.

What happened in Crimea was an unprovoked and unacceptable violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and its territorial integrity.

In the aftermath of this violation, together with other G7 leaders, the President of the European Council and myself, on behalf of the European Union, have strongly and unequivocally condemned this action on behalf of the European Union.

Today, at 14:00 Central European Time, we will release another statement that will leave no doubt about the determination of the G-7 countries and the European Union. We call on the Russian Federation to cease all efforts to annexe Ukraine's autonomous Republic of Crimea.

Honourable Members,

The present situation remains very tense, so we need to take a very principled but also a very responsible approach. The Ukrainian people have already shed too much blood in this process. No more lives should be put at risk.

Our immediate goal and objective should be to de-escalate the situation and find a peaceful solution to the current crisis, in full respect of international law. Any attempt to legitimise a referendum in Crimea is contrary to the Ukrainian constitution and international law and quite clearly illegal.

We have been proposing to Russia the possibility of direct talks through international mechanisms available, including a possible contact group, in full respect of the principles of unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. So far, unfortunately, as you know, to no avail. The High Representative/ Vice-President Catherine Ashton remains in constant contact with her counterparts on this front and I would like to praise her role.

Meanwhile, however, the financial and economic situation has already deteriorated dramatically, and we have not lost any time in mobilising a support package to help stem the tide and help Ukraine to stabilise its economic and financial situation.

I am proud that the Commission was quickly able to propose an overall support package of at least €11 billion from the European budget and European Union-based international financial institutions and this for the short and medium term. This was the proof that we can react quickly; that we can show solidarity; that we can rise to the challenge.

And as you know, this package was welcomed by our Member States in the European Council and, specifically, the Prime Minister of Ukraine expressed his gratitude for this initiative.

Some of the measures can be put into practice immediately. And indeed, just yesterday, Commissioner De Gucht and myself publicly presented a Commission proposal to frontload unilaterally the trade parts of the Association Agreement, so that Ukraine can benefit from tariff reductions and tariff rate quotas even before the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area is fully applied. This will save the Ukrainian economy €500 million a year in tariff cuts. I hope we can count on your, and the Council's, active commitment to fast-track the approval process.

We have also immediately dispatched a mission from our services to identify the economic and financial needs of the Ukrainian authorities. And I can announce that the Commission will propose next week, the 19th March, macro financial assistance of an additional €1 billion.

This amount, will bring our total macro financial assistance to 1.6 billion, and is a very concrete demonstration of our solidarity to help Ukraine face the short term difficulties. However, it is crucial that this is part of a wider international effort where also other international financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, as well as our Member States bilaterally and international partners, can participate. I would like to thank Olli Rehn and his services for moving quickly on this. And I would like to have a special word of thanks to Stefan Füle for his constant and strong engagement in this file.

At the same time it is equally crucial to underline that this aid package is not a quick fix and needs to be complemented by, on the other side, a reform-oriented and inclusive Ukrainian government, committed to fixing the current state of their financial system and rebuilding the economic foundations of the country, during both the current transition phase and in the medium to long term.

At the Summit meeting last week, we also decided that we will sign the political chapters of the Association agreement before the Presidential elections that will take place in May. This will seal the political association of Ukraine with the European Union, as was wished for by its people in such a clear manner during these past months and can naturally be followed by the entry into force of the remaining parts of the Association Agreement/DCFTA post presidential elections. We also reconfirmed our intention to sign Association Agreements/DCFTAs with Georgia and Moldova before the end of August.

Honourable members,

The European Union has been pro-active and united throughout this crisis, and I am sure this will also be the case when the European Council discusses the next steps next week.

This is vital for Ukraine's stability and prosperity, and it is vital for our credibility. The ball is currently in Russia's court and, as we speak, the diplomatic, political and military situation is not yet moving in the right direction.

Last week's meeting of Heads of State and Government has taken a gradual approach to the measures we are ready to take in response to the current situation, so as to send an unambiguous signal that going further down this path will have consequences, but at the same time preventing further entrenching the conflict from our side.

Our dialogue on visa facilitation and liberalisation, the discussions on the New Agreement and the preparations for the G8 meeting in Sochi have already been suspended. If meaningful negotiations do not begin within the next few days and produce results within a limited timeframe, this will trigger additional measures. And a further deterioration of the situation could lead to far reaching consequences, which I sincerely hope can be avoided.

Honourable Members,

I have been working together with the Commission and also with the Member States for the last 10 years to build a constructive relationship with Russia, while supporting our neighbours' efforts and sovereign choices to reform, to modernise and build closer relations with the European Union.

Our relationship with our Eastern partners does not have to be an exclusive one. Our model of engagement is that of open regionalism, and not of autarchic self-entrenchment. We are not asking, not even suggesting to our partners from the Eastern Neighbourhood, to turn their backs on Russia. On the contrary, we encourage them to have good neighbourly relations, to enhance their traditional trade ties. But at the same time Russia needs to accept fully the right of these countries to decide their own future and the nature of relations they chose to have with Russia.

The page of last century's history should be turned and not re-written. I believe in a European continent where the rule of law prevails over the rule of force, where sovereignty is shared and not limited, where the logic of cooperation replaces the logic of confrontation. We don't need new Cold Wars. And we certainly do not want them.

Security does not come from segregation, separating communities, building fences, but by embracing differences and diversity. Ukraine should not be a border between neighbours that don't speak to each other, but a bridge where they can meet.

Ukraine should not be seen as a problem for Europe, but an asset for a more united European continent.

On the basis of these principles, I think we can say that a united, inclusive, stable and prosperous Ukraine can only be of benefit to all its neighbours and partners. The European Union remains committed to that goal. To Ukraine's unity and to European peace.

I thank you for your attention.