



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

SECRETARIAT-GENERAL

PV(2024) 2502 final

- English translation of the French version which is authentic -

Brussels, 30 October 2024

TEXTE EN

MINUTES

of the 2502nd meeting of the Commission

held in Brussels

(Berlaymont)

on Wednesday 2 October 2024

(morning)

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Single sitting: Wednesday 2 October 2024 (morning)

The sitting opened at 9.12 with Ms von der LEYEN, President, in the chair.

Present:

Ms von der LEYEN	President	
Ms VESTAGER	Executive Vice-President	
Mr DOMBROVSKIS	Executive Vice-President	
Mr ŠEFČOVIČ	Executive Vice-President	
Ms JOUROVÁ	Vice-President	
Ms ŠUICA	Vice-President	
Mr SCHINAS	Vice-President	
Mr SCHMIT	Member	Items 8 (in part) to 10
Mr GENTILONI	Member	
Mr WOJCIECHOWSKI	Member	
Ms FERREIRA	Member	
Ms KYRIAKIDES	Member	Items 1 to 10 (in part)
Mr REYNDERS	Member	
Ms JOHANSSON	Member	
Mr LENARČIČ	Member	
Mr VÁRHELYI	Member	Items 8 (in part) to 10
Ms URPILAINEN	Member	
Ms McGUINNESS	Member	
Ms IVANOVA	Member	
Mr HOEKSTRA	Member	

Absent:

Mr BORRELL i FONTELLES	High Representative / Vice-President
Mr HAHN	Member
Ms DALLI	Member
Ms SIMSON	Member

The following sat in to represent absent Members of the Commission:

Ms LORENZO	Member of Mr BORRELL's cabinet
Mr NOACK	Expert in Mr HAHN's cabinet
Mr VELLA	Head of Cabinet to Ms DALLI
Mr KADARIK	Deputy Head of Cabinet to Ms SIMSON

The following also sat in:

Mr SEIBERT	Head of Cabinet to the PRESIDENT	
Mr CALLEJA CRESPO	Director-General, Legal Service	
Ms SPINANT	Director-General, DG Communication	
Mr MAMER	Head of the Spokesperson's Service and Chief Spokesperson of the Commission	
Ms PODESTA	Deputy Chief Spokesperson of the Commission	
Mr THYGESEN	Chairman, European Fiscal Board	Item 8
Mr MALZUBRIS	Economic Data Analyst at the Secretariat of the European Fiscal Board	Item 8
Mr ADAM	Deputy Head of Cabinet to the PRESIDENT	
Ms SEMLALI	Policy Assistant in the PRESIDENT's cabinet	
Mr TAQUET-GRAZIANI	Acting Head of Unit in the Secretariat-General	
Ms BUKA	Secretariat-General	

Secretary: Ms JUHANSONE, Secretary-General, assisted by Ms DEPREZ, Director in the Secretariat-General.

1. AGENDAS

(OJ(2024) 2502/FINAL; SEC(2024) 2502/FINAL)

The Commission took note of that day's agenda and of the tentative agendas for forthcoming meetings.

2. WEEKLY MEETING OF HEADS OF CABINET

(RCC(2024) 2502)

The Commission considered the Secretary-General's report on the weekly meeting of Heads of Cabinet held on Tuesday 1 October 2024.

3. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES

The Commission held over approval of the minutes of its 2500th and 2501st meetings of 11 and 17 September 2024 for a later date.

4. INTERINSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS

(RCC(2024) 133)

The Commission took note of the outcome of the written exchange of the Interinstitutional Relations Group (GRI) for the week from 23 to 27 September 2024 (RCC(2024) 133).

The Commission approved the line proposed for the following point:

- **Position to be taken on behalf of the European Union on submitting proposals for amendment of Appendices II and III of the Convention on the conservation of European wildlife and natural habitats with a view to the meeting of the Standing Committee of the Convention (Council Decision) –**

2023/0469 (NLE)

Line set out in SI(2024) 337.

The Commission took note of the following point:

- **Rules to prevent and combat child sexual abuse (Regulation) – ZARZALEJOS report – 2022/0155 (COD)**

Information set out in SI(2024) 336.

**5. COORDINATION OF EXTERNAL ACTION
(RCC(2024) 35)**

The Commission took note of the operational conclusions in RCC(2024) 35 of the meeting of the Group for External Coordination (EXCO) held on Wednesday 25 September 2024.

6. WRITTEN PROCEDURES, EMPOWERMENT AND DELEGATION OF POWERS

**6.1. WRITTEN PROCEDURES APPROVED
(SEC(2024) 225 ET SEQ.)**

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted between 16 and 29 September 2024.

**6.2. EMPOWERMENT
(SEC(2024) 226 ET SEQ.)**

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted between 16 and 29 September 2024.

6.3. DELEGATION / SUBDELEGATION OF POWERS
(SEC(2024) 227 ET SEQ.)

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted under the delegation and subdelegation procedures between 16 and 29 September 2024 archived in Decide.

6.4. WRITTEN PROCEDURES SPECIFICALLY IDENTIFIED
(SEC(2024) 228 AND /2)

The Commission took note of the written procedures specifically identified for which the time limit expired between 30 September and 4 October 2024, and of the finalisation written procedure.

7. ADMINISTRATIVE AND BUDGETARY MATTERS
(SEC(2024) 229)

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS
(PERS(2024) 56)

7.1. DG COMPETITION – APPOINTMENT OF A CHIEF COMPETITION
ECONOMIST AT GRADE AD14
(PERS(2024) 19 TO /4)

The Commission had before it applications under Article 2(a) of the Conditions of Employment of Other Servants of the European Union for the post of Chief Competition Economist in DG Competition (PERS(2024) 19 and /2).

It took note of the opinions of the Consultative Committee on Appointments of 24 July and 29 August 2024 (PERS(2024) 19/3 and /4).

The Commission then examined the applicants' qualifications for the post. On a proposal from Mr HAHN, in agreement with the PRESIDENT, and after consulting Ms VESTAGER, the Commission decided to appoint Mr Emanuele TARANTINO to the post in question as a member of the temporary staff under Article 2(a) of the Conditions of Employment of Other Servants of the European Union, for a period of three years, renewable once for a maximum period of two years.

This decision would take effect on a date to be determined.

7.2. DG EDUCATION, YOUTH, SPORT AND CULTURE – AMENDMENT OF THE ORGANISATION CHART, TRANSFER OF AN AD16 OFFICIAL UNDER ARTICLE 7 OF THE STAFF REGULATIONS AND SECONDMENT IN THE INTEREST OF THE SERVICE UNDER ARTICLES 37 AND 38 OF THE STAFF REGULATIONS

On a proposal from Mr HAHN, in agreement with the PRESIDENT, and after consulting Ms IVANOVA, the Commission decided:

- to create a temporary post of *hors classe* adviser (EAC.HCA) reporting directly to the Director-General of DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture; this post would be abolished upon departure of the job-holder;
- to transfer to this newly created post, in the interest of the service under Article 7 of the Staff Regulations, Mr Vladimir SUCHA, currently Head of the European Commission Representation in Bratislava, Slovakia;
- to second Mr Vladimir SUCHA, in the interest of the service, under Articles 37 and 38 of the Staff Regulations, to the European University Institute (EUI) for the period from 1 January 2025 to 31 December 2025. The Directorate-General for Human Resources and Security was responsible for taking the necessary operational measures in accordance

with Commission Decision C(2013) 5555 on Administrative Aspects of External Mobility.

These decisions would take effect on 1 January 2025.

8. OTHER BUSINESS

EUROPEAN FISCAL BOARD'S 2024 ANNUAL REPORT

The PRESIDENT asked Mr Niels THYGESEN, Chair of the European Fiscal Board (EFB), to present the findings of this independent advisory body's annual report.

Mr THYGESEN began by thanking the College for inviting him to present the Board's report for 2024, which would also be its last report in its current composition. One part of the report looked back, evaluating the 2023 fiscal surveillance cycle, while the other looked forward, focusing in particular on the EU's future economic governance.

Turning to the retrospective part of the report and the macroeconomic context in 2023, Mr THYGESEN pointed out that the impact of the rise in energy prices had lasted longer than economic forecasts had predicted. Nominal gross domestic product (GDP) growth had clearly exceeded real GDP growth. Energy prices had come down after the 2022 hike, but core inflation had stayed high. Labour markets had remained resilient, however, with a record high employment rate.

With regard to public finances in 2023, headline deficits had remained largely unchanged despite the solid nominal GDP growth and the phasing out of temporary support measures. According to the Board, this was because underlying expenditure – in particular, social spending – had accelerated significantly, and revenues had grown at a slower rate than nominal GDP.

Mr THYGESEN highlighted the idiosyncrasies of the 2023 fiscal surveillance cycle identified by the Board. Although the conditions for activating the severe economic downturn clause had not been met since 2021, the clause had been extended until 2023. In addition, the EU fiscal guidance had focused on demand management, thus overlooking large structural deficits and challenges related to the sustainability of public finances. The Commission's final assessment had identified higher-than-recommended expenditure growth in eight Member States, but no action had been taken to remedy this. In 2023, even though several countries had breached the Treaty reference values, the Commission and the Council had not launched excessive deficit procedures, citing uncertainty as the reason for not applying the rules and deviating from the established practice. He also considered that the postponement of recommendations on excessive deficit procedures had created uncertainty and should not set a precedent for the future.

As regards the forward-looking part of the report and the future of the EU's new economic governance framework, Mr THYGESEN stressed the importance of implementation and enforcement. In this connection, he welcomed the fact that the 2024 reform of the Stability and Growth Pact, aimed in particular at simplifying the rules and enhancing Member States' ownership, had been broadly consistent with the Board's advice since 2017. Nevertheless, the Board considered that the reform's success would hinge on a smooth transition to the new system. To do this, the remaining uncertainties would need to be addressed, most notably the respective roles of the Treaty-based corrective arm and the reformed preventive arm. In this regard, the Board was concerned about the respective roles of the preventive and corrective arms.

With regard to the fiscal framework's national dimension, Mr THYGESEN considered that the reform should have strengthened the role of the independent fiscal institutions, which would have increased the transparency of the fiscal surveillance process. According to the Board, more proactive Commission enforcement was needed to ensure the independence of these institutions, as laid

down in the Budgetary Frameworks Directive, and also to increase their capacity to provide opinions on expenditure plans.

The Board was also of the view that European public goods should be put higher on the agenda and that the supply of more of these public goods would be needed to meet future challenges, through both national and EU joint efforts, and based on sound economic considerations. Although the omission of this subject from the 2024 reform was understandable, the Board nevertheless felt that it was essential to relaunch the reflection on European public goods in 2025.

In conclusion, Mr THYGESEN pointed out that the creation of the European Fiscal Board had been proposed in 2015 in the five Presidents' Report 'Completing Europe's Economic and Monetary Union'. The Board's mandate had twice been extended by the Commission. He stressed that the members of the Board had very much enjoyed their work and were grateful to the Commission for this opportunity and for the cordial and constructive exchanges with the members of the College.

He then emphasised the importance of the independence of supervisory authorities and welcomed the fact that the European Fiscal Board had always been able to draft its reports totally independently. He thanked the Board's Secretariat for its work, highlighting its in-depth knowledge of fiscal systems, which had enabled the Board to make an informed contribution to the debate on economic governance reform. He welcomed the explicit reference to the Board in the new Regulation on the effective coordination of economic policies and multilateral budgetary surveillance, and the planned strengthening of the Board's relations with the European Parliament and the Council.

Mr THYGESEN ended on a more personal note, recalling that over 50 years had passed since he had signed his first contract with the Commission to become an adviser to President ORTOLI during the oil crisis. Since then, he had always worked to achieve the goals of a genuine European economic and monetary union and of a community of destiny (*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*) within the

European Union. He expressed his firm belief that the integration of Member States' fiscal policies and the provision of European public goods remained key pillars of this community of destiny.

In the course of the discussion that followed, the Commission raised the following main points:

- very warm thanks to Mr THYGESEN for the important contribution made by the European Fiscal Board to the EU's budgetary surveillance, to the transparency of that surveillance and to the debate that had led to the recent reform of the economic governance framework;
- recognition both of the excellent cooperation between the Commission and the Board since its creation, and of the value of its impartial and sometimes critical assessments of EU fiscal policies;
- the importance of a credible implementation of new fiscal rules, in particular after the extended period in which the general escape clause had been applied;
- the need for the Member States to speed up their reform and investment efforts and to quickly adopt their medium-term fiscal structural plans;
- the forthcoming presentation of the autumn European Semester package, including the Commission's opinions on the draft fiscal plans of the euro area Member States, and the recommendations aimed at correcting excessive deficit procedures for a number of Member States;
- the atypical procedure followed that year in the context of the European Semester to allow the Member States to align their medium-term fiscal structural plans with the recommendations made as part of the excessive deficit procedure;
- the Commission's significantly enhanced coordination role in the new economic governance framework, with the introduction of discussions with the

Member States on their plans regarding public finances, reform and investment for the next seven years;

- the importance of the independence of the national fiscal institutions, the implementation of which could still vary depending on the context and on national traditions, which explained why this issue was dealt with in a directive as part of economic governance reform;
- the Commission’s overall sound management of economic governance over the past few years, which had been marked by various crises, with results that could now be seen, notably a level of inflation at 1.8%, a much less risky economic situation and the failure of certain catastrophic scenarios to materialise;
- the challenges that still remained regarding the implementation of the new economic governance framework, because of the fragile political situation in several Member States and the delays in sending the medium-term fiscal structural plans to the Commission;
- the constant support of Mr THYGESEN and the European Fiscal Board for the need to finance European public goods, such as defence and competitiveness, and the political desirability for the EU of moving forward on this issue on the basis of the experience gained with NextGenerationEU;
- the difficulties that still remained in this discussion, particularly concerning the financing of European public goods and the fair distribution of their added value so that all European citizens could draw the benefits.

The PRESIDENT brought the debate to a close by thanking Mr THYGESEN and the Board for their remarkable work and the clarity of the advice that they had provided to the Commission over the years. Taking up the idea of a community of destiny (*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*), she pointed out that the EU’s unified response had played a key role in managing the recent crises experienced by the EU, while at the same time allowing it to make significant progress towards modernising its

economy. This community of destiny would also be crucial during the forthcoming discussions between the new Commission and the Member States on providing strategic public goods and boosting European productivity. In this context, the PRESIDENT emphasised the importance of structuring the debates effectively, by first identifying common European projects and then finding the most appropriate ways to finance them.

**9. JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE, THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS AND THE EUROPEAN INVESTMENT BANK: BUILDING SUSTAINABLE INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AS A TEAM EUROPE
(JOIN(2024) 25 AND /2; RCC(2024) 131)**

The PRESIDENT began by hailing as a success the ‘Team Europe’ concept spearheaded by Ms URPILAINEN in the context of international partnerships. The Communication presented that day highlighted this Commission’s legacy, which in her view would have a lasting impact.

Ms URPILAINEN then presented the Joint Communication, which took stock of the progress made in the field of international partnerships and how they had contributed to the Commission’s political priorities. She highlighted the paradigm shift that had taken place in the EU cooperation model under this Commission’s mandate, moving away from the traditional donor-recipient model towards real partnerships. She explained that the EU’s partner countries wanted to be seen as actors in their own right, rather than mere aid recipients, and that they faced challenges and had interests that were often shared with the EU.

Over the previous five years, there had been a succession of global crises, which had compounded the challenges posed by climate change, regional instability and mounting geopolitical tensions. These crises had underlined global

interconnectedness and further increased the financing gap required to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. A need had arisen for a paradigm shift and resilience had become an absolute priority. Ms URPILAINEN felt that the development of fair and mutually beneficial partnerships was essential to strengthen the resilience of both the EU and its partners. This new paradigm built on the Team Europe approach and the Global Gateway investment strategy.

The Team Europe approach brought together the EU institutions, EU Member States, European development finance institutions and the European private sector. It was first deployed during the pandemic when it became clear that the EU could be much more impactful by pooling resources and knowhow, and had since become the EU's preferred *modus operandi* for external action. Ms URPILAINEN stressed that this approach also enabled the EU to increase the scale and visibility of its actions.

She then spoke of the Global Gateway strategy, which was launched in 2021 to mobilise up to EUR 300 billion for investment in sustainable and high-quality projects by 2027, and took into account the needs of the EU's partner countries, enabling them to develop their societies, infrastructure and economies. This strategy embodied the EU's new approach to international cooperation and represented the EU's positive offer to partner countries in a complex international environment where the 'battle of narratives' was being replaced by a 'battle of offers'. The aim of Global Gateway was to promote sustainable development and respond to the shared priorities of the EU and its partners, such as fair green and digital transitions, as well as strengthening strategic autonomy. This strategy was delivered through a Team Europe approach in conjunction with the private sector. Ms URPILAINEN explained that public resources were being used to foster an environment conducive to investment, growth and the creation of added value for local communities.

The Communication presented that day provided concrete examples of the implementation of the Global Gateway strategy in its main thematic sectors: climate and energy, digital, transport, health, education and research. Between 2021

and 2023, the EU had mobilised investments worth EUR 179 billion to support projects in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as in the EU's immediate neighbourhood, in cooperation with the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). Ms URPILAINEN pointed out that this already accounted for more than half of the EUR 300 billion target set for 2027.

She noted that alongside Global Gateway, other forms of international engagement under the Team Europe approach were also mentioned in the Communication, such as efforts to address the root causes of migration, engagement in the most vulnerable countries, and multilateral engagement. She stressed that the external dimension was an essential component of the Pact on Migration and Asylum, and pointed out that the EU had stepped up its engagement with origin and transit countries. The EU had also provided crucial support to vulnerable populations, in particular in the Sahel, Afghanistan and Sudan. Furthermore, it had continued to defend multilateralism and had been at the forefront of the implementation of Agenda 2030, supporting the legitimate request from its partners to reform multilateral structures and international financial architecture. Finally, she drew attention to the signing of a new framework agreement – the Samoa agreement – for cooperation with African, Caribbean and Pacific partners.

Ms URPILAINEN added that promoting human rights, combating inequality and empowering women and young people had been cross-cutting priorities for the Commission. She welcomed the fact that the EU was playing a leading role globally in championing education and had put specific mechanisms in place to ensure that future generations were listened to. She then gave a number of concrete examples of flagship projects under the Global Gateway strategy that illustrated this new approach to international cooperation, such as the Lobito Corridor, the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor, the Regional Teachers' Initiative in Africa and various initiatives to tackle problems related to sargassum algae.

By way of conclusion, Ms URPILAINEN expressed her view that the efforts made over the last five years had laid a strong foundation for a more sustainable and resilient future, for the EU and its partner countries alike.

In the course of the discussion that followed, the Commission raised the following main points:

- congratulations on the work carried out to foster international partnerships and acknowledgement of the merits of the Team Europe approach, which together constituted a significant legacy of the current Commission in the geopolitical sphere;
- the success of the Team Europe approach with respect to security and migration, which owed a great deal to the good cooperation between the Commission departments responsible for international partnerships and home affairs, as well as to the effective mobilisation of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) to address the challenges of migration and forced displacement;
- the example of the health field, with the Team Europe approach having proven effective in tackling the recent mpox outbreak in Africa, declared a global health emergency, when vaccines had been sent swiftly to the Democratic Republic of the Congo;
- the many international development projects carried out in the digital field, which included efforts to enhance digital skills and protect personal data in EU partner countries;
- the importance of promoting secure and reliable connectivity in third countries by supporting investments in secure communications infrastructure in partnership with trusted suppliers;
- a reminder that innovation and the safeguarding of fundamental rights were not

mutually exclusive but rather complementary;

- the need, in a complex geopolitical environment, to compete with what was being offered by other countries, which, although less stringent with respect to democracy and fundamental rights, was often more effective in terms of communication and visibility;
- the need to step up implementation of projects on the ground, which required a Team Europe approach to projects and funding as well as good coordination inside the Commission;
- the importance of giving partner countries technical support to help them adapt to this change in approach.

Wrapping up the discussion, the PRESIDENT agreed that it was important to be an appealing and competitive player on the international scene. She felt that the Global Gateway initiative had now gained international recognition and she highlighted its contribution to the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII). Countries in the Global South had seen how China's generous financing packages did not always bring long-term added value, especially with regard to local job creation and economic development. The EU, meanwhile, focused on the creation of added value at local level and on the processing of goods domestically, particularly with respect to critical raw materials. On that point, the PRESIDENT referred to China's recent proposal to establish closer ties between the Global Gateway strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and noted that the EU had decided to maintain its separate, values-based approach in order to ensure sustainable and fair development.

Following these presentations, the Commission approved the joint Communication in JOIN(2024) 25/2 for transmission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank, and, for information, to the national parliaments.

10. OTHER BUSINESS (CONTINUED)

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN EXTERNAL RELATIONS

The PRESIDENT began by referring to the situation in the Middle East and condemned in the strongest terms the previous day's attack on Israel involving around 200 ballistic missiles launched by Iran. Such actions threatened regional stability and worsened tension in an already highly volatile context. She pointed out that the EU continued to call for a ceasefire on the border with Lebanon and in Gaza, and for compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701. She also informed the College that she would take part in that day's videoconference of G7 leaders to discuss the situation.

The PRESIDENT then announced that she would meet UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer that afternoon to identify potential areas for progress in EU-UK cooperation. She recalled the need to respect the agreements previously negotiated, namely the Withdrawal Agreement, the Windsor Framework and the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement.

Referring to her recent visit to Ukraine, the PRESIDENT reported on the critical situation on the battlefield and as regards energy infrastructure, and hailed Ms SIMSON's work in that context. To address the challenges linked to Russia's destruction of Ukrainian energy infrastructure, the EU was trying to rebuild and reconnect Ukraine's electricity grid, while promoting decentralised energy supply that was more difficult to target and destroy, such as that provided by solar panels. She stressed the need for continued efforts to prevent energy shortages from considerably worsening living conditions in Ukraine, especially in the run-up to winter, which could force large numbers of Ukrainians to flee the country. To bolster Ukraine's economic security, the EU had proposed a substantial financial contribution of EUR 35 billion as part of the G7's USD 50 billion loan, to be financed by windfall profits from Russia's immobilised assets.

The PRESIDENT then mentioned her recent visit to Poland, where she had met representatives of central and eastern European countries affected by the devastating floods in September. Such extreme events, as well as the forest fires in Portugal and Greece, were becoming more frequent as a result of climate change. The widespread damage had exhausted the EU's financial resources for emergency relief, especially the European Solidarity Fund, which posed a major challenge in responding to future disasters.

She stressed the importance of the EU Deforestation Regulation, highlighting the alarming speed of global deforestation and the need to ensure that imported products did not come from agricultural land created by deforestation. While acknowledging the concerns of third countries regarding the timetable for implementation, she was confident that timber would be traceable in future. In view of concerns raised by the EU's international partners, the Commission proposed to give the parties concerned an additional year to prepare. In so far as all implementation tools were technically ready, the extra 12 months could serve as a phasing-in period to ensure correct and effective application. The proposed extension did not alter the objectives or content of the rules.

At the PRESIDENT's request, Mr LENARČIČ reported on the dramatic humanitarian situation in the Middle East. The EU had to remain particularly vigilant in view of developments in the region, particularly in Lebanon, where more than one million people had been displaced since the start of hostilities, in a particularly difficult economic and political context.

In addition, more than 100 000 people had taken refuge in Syria, even though the situation there meant it could not be regarded as a safe country. Mr LENARČIČ explained that contacts had been established with the EU's partners on the ground to best meet the needs of the Lebanese and Syrian populations. Funding for Lebanon had already been released and more would follow soon, as EU support was essential for the country. Lebanon had requested emergency medical assistance under the EU Civil Protection Mechanism.

The continuing needs of the civilian population in Gaza also had to be met, as the humanitarian situation on the ground was catastrophic, with scarce and insufficient food supplies, coupled with a genuine collapse of law and order and no prospect of improvement. The situation in the West Bank was hardly better, with economic and political instability, civilian loss of life, destruction of Palestinian property and expansion of Israeli settlements. Mr LENARČIČ concluded by highlighting the continued need for European aid to the Palestinian Authority.

Mr VÁRHELYI referred to the political deadlock in Lebanon in recent years. European aid was targeted at key areas for the country's economy and security, especially through direct funding for the Lebanese armed forces. In that regard, the Israeli army and the Lebanese armed forces were coordinating to properly calibrate their interventions, particularly in southern Lebanon. Hezbollah's influence had to be restricted for the stability of the country, and the EU cooperation programme would continue to assist Lebanon in implementing the necessary structural reforms.

With regard to Gaza, Mr VÁRHELYI felt that the situation was particularly complex because of Hamas's actions. Links between UNRWA staff and the military wing of Hamas had also been recently revealed.

The PRESIDENT mentioned her visit to Lebanon, together with the President of Cyprus, and welcomed the fact that Team Europe was getting involved in the same way it had done in neighbouring countries. As regards the revelations about the activities of some UNWRA staff, she believed that the EU should continue to support the populations affected through UNWRA while ensuring that the necessary safeguards were in place.

In the course of the discussion that followed, the Commission raised the following main points:

- the need to encourage Member States to make a clear commitment to peace in the Middle East;

- a question about evacuation and repatriation arrangements to be made for the many European citizens in Lebanon, especially French nationals;
- a reminder that the first anniversary of the 7 October terrorist attacks was approaching and, in that context, the question of a possible political declaration by the Commission;
- the importance of creating a climate of mutual trust in EU-UK relations, and the recognition of developments already taking place along those lines, for example in the context of discussions on sanctions against Russia;
- in that regard, a reminder of the risks of those sanctions being circumvented, sometimes even by European companies, and of the efforts made with the Member States to remedy the problem;
- the need to closely monitor the reactions of the various stakeholders to the EU rules on deforestation, and to take due account of the international dimension of the issue.

In response to some of the points raised during the discussion, the PRESIDENT noted that several Member States had already called on their citizens to leave Lebanon and had started organising evacuations, in coordination with Mr BORRELL and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The EU was using its means and influence, in particular by engaging with all players in the region, but even the United States had difficulty in making the voice of reason prevail in that conflict.

Mr LENARČIČ considered that the Commission should continue to support the ceasefire in Gaza and advocate for an agreement on the release of the hostages held there, while stressing the importance of continuous delivery of humanitarian aid. This was Israel's responsibility as a party to the conflict and an occupying power. He also felt that UNWRA should be supported and that the staff members at fault should be punished, not the agency itself, which was nevertheless responsible for

dealing with those problems internally. As regards European citizens still in Lebanon, Mr LENARČIČ noted that the EU was ready to intervene in emergencies, in coordination with the Member States' consulates and under the auspices of the EEAS, and to organise repatriation flights if necessary, as had been the case on a much larger scale during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Commission took note of this information.

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The meeting closed at 10.59.