



Strasbourg plenary session 6-9 September

- Pakistan floods, Barroso speech
- Roma deportations, limits on animal testing

The week in Strasbourg will see Commission President José Manuel Barroso make his first "State of the European Union" speech. Also on the agenda is how to help Pakistan after the floods devastated the country. The controversy over the Roma deportations will also be discussed during talks between MEPs and the European Commission. There is also likely to be steps to limit the use of animals in scientific testing. All of these issues can be followed here on the Parliament's website.

The week will also see a debate on human rights in Iran, focusing on the cases of Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani and Zahra Bahrami.

This focus will be updated daily to bring you the latest news from the European Parliament's Plenary Session in Strasbourg.

Newsletter - 6-9 September - Strasbourg plenary session

State of the Union debate with President Barroso

Commission President José Manuel Barroso will give his first-ever State of the Union address to the European Parliament in Strasbourg on Tuesday. The ensuing debate will enable MEPs to review with Mr Barroso the developments in the European Union since the EP elections of June 2009 and the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in December 2009.

MEPs to discuss aid for Pakistan flood victims

The floods in Pakistan and the EU's response to the ensuing humanitarian crisis will be debated by MEPs with the Commission in Strasbourg on Tuesday afternoon.

Deportation of Roma

Parliament will discuss with the Commission whether the deportation of hundreds of Roma people this summer from France to Romania and Bulgaria breached EU provisions on freedom of movement and fundamental rights.

New limits on animal testing

The use of animals in scientific experiments will soon be scaled down if Parliament backs an agreement reached with Council in July on new EU legislation.

President of Mali to address MEPs

The President of Mali, Amadou Toumani Touré, will address the European Parliament in a formal sitting at 12 noon on Tuesday.

Anti-counterfeiting agreement: latest talks

The ongoing negotiations on the multilateral Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) will be discussed with the Commission on Wednesday in the wake of the tenth round of talks, held in Washington from 16 to 20 August.

Press freedom in the EU

Curbs on freedom of expression and information as well as government control of the media in several Member States will come under the spotlight in a debate with the Commission on Tuesday.

EU law needed to fight discrimination against same-sex couples?

MEPs will ask the Commission on Tuesday about its plans to combat discrimination encountered by same-sex couples.

Human rights in Iran: two women at risk

Parliament will hold a debate on human rights in Iran, focusing on the cases of Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani and Zahra Bahrami.

These are just some of the issues being debated and voted on during the week.

José Bové raises fears over falling incomes of Europe's farmers

- Falling incomes for farmers causing concerns
 - Role of supermarkets in spotlight
-

The state of Europe's farmers will be in the spotlight this week when farmer turned MEP José Bové raises the issue on Monday at the European Parliament. His report investigates the falling incomes of farmers and the rising prices of goods for consumers. In particular he is concerned about the role and influence of the continent's huge supermarket chains. Mr Bové shot to fame in his native France years ago when he drove a tractor through a McDonalds in protest at globalisation. *(In a vote on Tuesday MEPs backed his report with a few slight amendments).*

Q. In Europe consumers are seeing rising food prices and farmers are suffering from falling incomes. Supermarkets are being accused of making excessive profits. What, in your view, is the situation?

José Bové: The situation is dramatic. When the prices of products fall, consumers do not see any difference. On the other hand, when commodity prices go up on a speculative basis, the increase is passed on to consumers.

Farmers are living more poorly on the sale of their products and the difference is held by the large food processors or by large retailers.

Q. Specifically, what does your report suggest to remedy this?

José Bové: First, we need to address speculation on commodities. The markets operate on the stock. We must get out of a policy based on "casino" commodities.

Secondly, we must look closely at production costs. We can not accept that farmers are paid below their costs of production.

Thirdly, there are strict rules against abuses of dominant positions. A lot of countries, consumer organizations and producers are demanding more transparency.

Finally, we must strengthen the power of producer associations in the negotiations between farmers, processors and distributors.

Q. Your report says that the food waste could reach 30% of food production

José Bové: Today, 30% of food is wasted. This is not acceptable because it is a very large number of people who do not eat their fill in Europe. We must shorten the circuits, promote direct sales and go to a closer proximity between producers and consumers. Finally, we must modify the rules that make you throw away products as seen in supermarkets or the agriculture industry.

Q. Are you satisfied with the contents of this report or would you want him to go a little further?

José Bové: I am very satisfied because we were able to work in the background and interview people who were able to express all viewpoints. The vote on Monday in the Parliament's Agriculture Committee went very well, with the whole Committee supporting the draft.

We now see how this will happen in the Plenary. I feel that industry and large retailers are lobbying to remove what might hinder them in the report.

José Bové's report will be presented Monday 6 September in the European Parliament with a vote being held on 7 September.

Farmers in Europe

- Increase in food prices of 3.3% per year since 1996
- Farmers incomes rise 2.1% in same period
- Average income for farmers declines 12% in 2009

Opening of the Session: Urgent debate on the case of Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani on Monday

- Vote on Iranian women being stoned brought forward due to urgency
 - Buzek restates Parliament's opposition to death penalty
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President Jerzy Buzek opened this week's Strasbourg session by highlighting the case of Ms **Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani**, sentenced to death by stoning in Iran. He noted that she had also been sentenced to 99 lashes after her case was reported in the European media, and urged the Iranian authorities to reconsider the case in a fair, transparent manner. He reiterated that the European Parliament opposes the death penalty in any circumstances.

In view of the urgency of this case, Parliament's debate on it was brought forward from Thursday to Monday evening, with a vote at midday on Wednesday.

A vote on the parliamentary immunity of Lithuanian MEP Viktor Uspaskich (ALDE) was added to Tuesday midday.

Finally, a number of MEPs contested the decision of the Conference of Presidents (group leaders) on Thursday to check MEPs' presence at the State of the Union debate with Commission President Barroso on Tuesday morning. President Buzek stressed the importance of the debate, given Parliament's new responsibilities under the Lisbon Treaty. He noted that no other meetings were scheduled at the same time and urged all MEPs to attend. President Buzek said that the Bureau (the President and Vice-Presidents) would have another look at the matter on Monday night and would then take a final decision.

Expulsions of Roma from France: Parliament calls for EU action

In a debate on the situation of Roma people, EPP group MEPs emphasized the need for stronger EU action to foster the social integration of Roma, while S&D, ALDE, Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL speakers condemned the French government's expulsion of Roma people as discriminatory and in breach of EU law. The legality of these measures needs to be assessed, said Commissioner Reding.

For the Council, Belgian Secretary of State for European Affairs Olivier Chastel reaffirmed its attachment to the "values and principles in the Treaties" and "respect for the rule of law, including the rights of minorities". He reiterated that it is up to all Member States to support the integration of the Roma. "There has to be freedom of movement, and the Roma cannot be victims of discrimination", he added.

Justice and Fundamental Rights Commissioner Viviane Reding said that "Member States are in charge of public order and ensuring the safety" of their citizens, but all measures should be proportionate. Ms Reding noted the assurance of French authorities that there had been no discrimination of the Roma. However, the Commission services are "checking if what has been said reflects the reality on the ground", she said, adding that "so far, we have identified a number of issues where French authorities will have to provide supplementary information".

Livia Járóka is a Hungarian Member of the centre right European People's Party reminded the House that expulsions may be decided "only on a case by case basis". She stressed that "nobody should face expulsion just for being Roma" and that collective expulsions "might be repulsive", but so is "the lack of action to alleviate poverty and social exclusion", she said, emphasizing the importance of reinforcing Roma inclusion through a common European strategy.

Austrian Socialist Hannes Swoboda expressed his disappointment with the Commission's "unclear answer". "This is scandalous. I want to know whether the French authorities have contravened the European law or not", he said, adding that there might be other countries, "maybe Italy or Hungary", which could follow in France's steps.

Romanian Liberal Renate Weber said that France "is using tricks" by giving Roma people money provided they leave the country. "They call it voluntary repatriation", but it is a "clear violation of the European and international legislation", she said, stressing that that the Commission needs to demonstrate that it is truly the guardian of EU principles.

French Green Hélène Flautre asked whether Commissioner Reding, after having held several meetings on the issue, still had no clear opinion on the matter. She asked whether the Commissioner needed any extra experts and evidence to conclude that the situation is unacceptable, adding "stop refusing to take your responsibility!"

British MEP Timothy Kirkhope (Europe of Conservatives & Reformists) asked his colleagues to wait until the Commission makes a formal ruling on the legality of the measures. "Then we can make an informed judgement based on all the facts and decide how to focus on better integration of the Roma people, rather than pre-emptively condemn a fellow Member State", he said, underlining that "this continent must never revive the ghosts of past nationalisms".

"Sarkozy is violating EU law, the free movement of persons and the Charter of Fundamental Rights", argued German **MEP Cornelia Ernst (GUE/NGL)**, adding that "I would like to see a stop to these deportations", also mentioning cases in Austria, Germany and Italy. "We have to fight against this in the Parliament", she concluded.

"All this is a pretext", said **Italian Mario Borghezio (Europe of Freedom & Democracy)**, highlighting that "Romania and Bulgaria have not resolved the problem back home". Roma people "should also obey the law", he continued. "EU citizens are also victims of their crimes and would not like to have Roma living next door", he said, adding that "we need to have courage to say this".

A resolution will be put to a plenary vote on Thursday (9 September)

Those pesky fake coins that don't work

- Report calls for tighter safeguards
 - It wants standard way of dealings with fakes
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Ever strolled over to a vending machine and put your coins in only to discover they don't work? You then bang on the machine in frustration and often have to walk away without the product or your coins. Either it's faulty or possibly the coins you have in your pocket are fake.

Many of us are unwittingly strolling around with counterfeit euro coins that have entered the system. A report by **Bulgarian MEP Slavi Binev** to be voted on Tuesday calls for stronger measures to tackle counterfeiting and make sure the coins are real.

The report states that in future banks would have to make sure that all the notes and coins they put into circulation (for example through cash machines) are all checked to ensure they are not counterfeit.

The report also wants a standard way of **identifying and getting rid of fake coins**. At the moment different countries use different ways of dealing with them. The report aims to set up mandatory common standards for authentication of euro coins - ensuring sure they are not counterfeited or unfit for circulation. The standards for the coins would be set by European Technical and Scientific Centre (ETSC). The Binev report will be voted Tuesday 7 September after 1200.

Fake coins

- 2009: 172 100 coins removed (down 12% on year before)
- € 2 coin is most popular for counterfeiters
- € 15 billion in circulation

State of the (E)Union: The Europe of today and tomorrow debated in the EP

- Pledges to boost employment through green investment and cutting red tape
 - MEPs rally behind Roma community
-

Europe's present and future were discussed today as **Commission President, José Manuel Barroso**, presented his first "State of the Union" speech, announcing initiatives to fight unemployment, including through "green" jobs, while enhancing economic governance and profoundly reviewing the EU budget. MEPs in turn, insisted on the need for even greater ambition for the EU, while speakers, including Mr Barroso, strongly criticised the treatment of the Roma minority.

Commission President José Manuel Barroso said the Union "withstood the test" of the crisis but has to move forward. However, he said a number of key challenges lay ahead.

Mr Barroso promised better **economic governance** to deal with this crisis and avert future ones. He said the Commission would unveil proposals on 29 September for stronger national budget monitoring, promising that "we will match monetary union with true economic union", while making sure that economic fundamentals are improved as "a debt generation makes an unsustainable nation".

On the job front he said he aimed to **restore growth and jobs** via the "Europe 2020 strategy" with the creation of a "European Vacancy Monitor" to help people find jobs. He also said his aim was to promote sustainable development and create 3 million "green-collar" jobs by the end of the decade. Steps that could help this included agreement on an EU-wide Patent and a promised 38 billion euro of savings for companies by cutting red tape.

In the area of **Freedom, Justice and Security** he said that while EC will further address "the exploitation of illegal immigrants", terrorism and organised crime with concrete proposals, "everyone in EU must respect the law and governments must respect human rights". He also underlined that "racism and xenophobia have no place in Europe" and made "a strong appeal not to reawaken the ghosts of Europe's past".

On **EU spending and the budget** he called for the strengthening of EU own resources, i.e. those not provided directly from the member states' budgets. He promised a proposal for a new system for the EU "own resources" next month. He also proposed moving from the current 7 year multiannual budget to a 10 year one and issuing "EU project bonds" to finance infrastructure projects and generate jobs without burdening national budgets.

Internationally he called for Europe to develop a true foreign and security policy. "If we don't act together, Europe will not be a force in the world, and they will move on without us: without Europe and without its member states".

He announced the Commission will commit the EU to a further 1 billion contribution to the **UN Millennium Development Goals**. Also, he said there would be proposals in October to pool national resources in an EU crisis response mechanism for tragedies like Pakistan's floods.

For the **European People's Party Joseph Daul** called for an EU tax that would not add to the existing tax burden. He explained that it was not in addition to a national tax but rather it could be used to achieve economies of scale regarding EU policies and ensuring public money was better spent. He also insisted on the importance of investing in research and innovation, the economy and in reducing inequalities.

"I didn't like your speech" was the emphatic conclusion of **Socialist and Democrat leader Martin Schulz**. He was critical that it had not touched on the current state of the EU: "The state of the Union today is not good. You and your Commission are failing to play the role

given you by the treaties, at least not in full measure." Mr Schulz promised to support the EC in efforts to defend the "community method" against "intergovernmentalism". He strongly condemned what he termed "a witch-hunt" against the Roma.

Liberal Leader Guy Verhofstadt noted that in the last year that "problems were big but unity was very small" pointing out to the problems encountered by Greece. He said genuine economic governance was needed as well as "finalising" the response to the crisis with concrete measures on such things as derivatives trading.

For the **Greens**, **Daniel Cohn-Bendit** asked whether the EU is headed towards "an inter-governmental Europe or a Community" and in a reference to the Roma issue, invoked Albert Camus in pointing out that "the defence of minorities means not imposing the majority's will", naming France as being "in breach of the treaties".

Michał Tomasz Kamiński for the Europe of Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group told the House that: "The 27 member states are going to stay there, they are elected by citizens. We want balance between community and what is intergovernmental in Europe" he said.

Lothar Bisky of the leftist GUE/NGL group said: "Millions that have been spent rescuing banks have not been spent on the neediest in society or in education". He also condemned the treatment of Roma: "Values that apply for everyone in the European Union also apply for the Roma".

Nigel Farage of the Europe for Freedom and Democracy group criticised Mr Barroso's speech for "completely ignoring the state of the Union" and commented that "the more common policies there are, the less people like it".

The European Commission

- Proposes laws to Council (where Ministers from governments meet) and the European Parliament
- Manages EU legislation & policies
- 27 Commissioners appointed for five years - nominated by governments but approved by Parliament

Fewer animals to be used for scientific experiments

- Requires national authorities to assess the animal welfare implications of each experiment
- Promotes alternative testing methods and reducing the levels of pain inflicted on animals

The number of animals used in scientific experiments is set to be reduced under new EU legislation approved by the European Parliament on Wednesday. The aim is to strike a better balance between animal welfare and the need for research into diseases.

Member States will have two years to comply with new rules that aim to scale down the number of animals used for scientific purposes while not hindering research.

The final version of this legislation, which is the fruit of an agreement between Parliament and the Council, requires national authorities to assess the animal welfare implications of each experiment done, with a view to promoting alternative testing methods and reducing the levels of pain inflicted on animals. It also tightens up rules on the use of primates in scientific experiments, by classifying tests according to severity and detailing the inspections needed to ensure compliance.

During the debate held earlier today, German MEP Elisabeth Jeggle (EPP), who steered the legislation through Parliament, said the compromise reached was a good deal and told MEPs "if you want animals to be protected, please give it your support".

More effort needed to devise alternative methods

All Member States must ensure that whenever an alternative method is recognised by Community law it, is used instead of animal testing. In addition, approval should be granted only to tests that use killing methods which cause the least pain or distress, while still providing scientifically satisfactory results.

The use of animals in scientific experiments is allowed for basic research and for research into human, animal or plant diseases, drug testing and species preservation, and also for higher education and forensic investigations.

Safeguard clauses have also been introduced to allow national governments to derogate from parts of the legislation and to react to emergency situations, but only for scientifically justifiable reasons and after informing the Commission. The use of a safeguard clause will always be subject to approval by other EU Member States.

Using fewer primates without compromising medical research

The legislation broadly bans the use of great apes such as chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas and orang-utans for scientific testing. The Commission's draft law would also have restricted the use of other primates such as marmosets and macaques but MEPs felt this could hamper scientific research into neurodegenerative illnesses such as Alzheimer's. Parliament and Council therefore agreed to allow the use of such primates if there is scientific evidence that the goal of the test cannot be achieved without using these species.

Test severity classification

The new legislation lists different categories of pain that may be inflicted during a test ("non-recovery", "mild", "moderate" or "severe"), following an amendment approved by the Parliament at its first reading of the legislation.

To avoid repeated suffering, the Commission proposed to allow the same animals to be re-used only if the test entails pain classed as "up to mild". MEPs feared that applying criteria that are too strict would result in even more animals being used for tests, which would defeat the object. They decided, in agreement with national governments, to allow the re-use of animals even after tests involving "moderate" pain, provided a vet is consulted first.

Inspection and review clause. To ensure the provisions are implemented, MEPs stress the need for regular and effective inspections of bodies that carry out scientific experiments using animals.

The agreement with Council obliges national governments to ensure inspections are performed on at least 33% of laboratories that use animals, some of which should be unannounced. The Commission will oversee national inspection authorities.

In addition, the Commission is required to evaluate and review the proposed legislation five years after its entry into force.

MEPs condemn stoning sentence on Iranian Sakineh Mohammadi-Ashtiani

- Death sentence on Iranian Sakineh Mohammadi-Ashtiani strongly condemned
- Iran urged to review case

The death sentence on Iranian Sakineh Mohammadi-Ashtiani was strongly condemned in a resolution adopted on Wednesday with the support of all the European Parliament's political groups. MEPs say that, regardless of the facts, a sentence of death by stoning can never be justified or accepted. They urge the Iranian authorities to set aside the sentences imposed on Mrs Mohammadi-Ashtiani and review her case.

Parliament also urges the Iranian Government to reconsider the case of Zahra Bahrami, an Iranian-Dutch national, and immediately grant her access to a lawyer and consular assistance or release her or grant her due process. MEPs also want a stay of execution for the 18-year old Ebrahim Hamidi.

Ban stoning and decriminalise adultery and homosexuality

The resolution calls on Iran to outlaw the cruel and inhumane practice of stoning. Iran continues to find itself in the group of very few countries together with Afghanistan, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Nigeria, which still practise stoning. Iran should also introduce a moratorium on executions pending the abolition of the death penalty as well as decriminalising 'adultery' and consensual sexual relations between adults, say MEPs.

Release all human rights defenders in Iran

The Iranian authorities should immediately release all those detained solely because of their involvement in peaceful protests and for using their basic human right to freedom of expression, urges the resolution. It also repeats the EP's call for the acquittal of the seven Baha'i leaders.

Turning to measures the EU could take, MEPs suggest providing more financial support to Iranian human rights defenders through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). They also believe the EU travel ban and asset freeze should be extended to those responsible for human rights violations, repression and curtailment of freedom in the country.

The resolution was adopted by an overwhelming majority of MEPs: 658 votes in favour, 1 against and 22 abstentions.

MEPs call for more rights for same sex couples in Europe

- MEPs speak of personal experiences
- Many same sex couples in Europe being denied rights

Same sex marriage is a reality in five European countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Sweden). In some others, homosexual couples can establish a civil partnership. What if they move to another EU country where that is not the case? Tuesday night MEPs asked the Commission 3 questions about discrimination of same sex married people or those in civil union couples who “can experience situations of direct and indirect discrimination when working, studying and travelling in the EU”.

The debate focused on 3 oral questions to the Commission, namely; discrimination against same-sex married or in civil-partnerships couples, mutual recognition of marriages and civil partnerships contracted by same-sex couples and discrimination against same-sex couples and freedom of movement.

Members speak of their personal experiences

In the debate some MEPs spoke of their personal experiences. Dutch MEP **Cornelis de Jong** (GUE/NGL) said he registered his same-sex couple 21 years ago in Holland "but if we go to Poland we are no longer a legally recognized couple. When we use our freedom to move within the EU we lose a series of rights".

British Member **Michael Cashman** (S&D) has been in a same-sex civil partnership for 27 years. "If I would have an accident whilst on holiday in Italy, my partner would not even be given the basic right of deciding whether in such a case I should be on a life support machine or not. Rights acquired in one country should be respected in another".

"We do it for jam, and wine, and beer", why not "for relationships?"

Dutch Liberal **Sophia In't Veld** said that "every single EU citizen should have the same rights. It is not for the EU or governments to judge a personal relationship". She went on to say that "the very least we should do in the EU is apply the principle of mutual recognition: we do it for jam, and wine, and beer, why don't we do it for marriage and for relationships?"

Viviane Reding - the EU Commissioner for justice, fundamental rights and citizenship, told the House that "it is implicit that if you are allowed to move freely and to reside freely you must also have the rights which are coming from your first residence to your second residence". But "we have to advance cautiously" to "bring step by step the resistant member states to accepting the general rules".

Rules "need to be amended"

Italian Member **Salvatore Iacolino** (EPP) commented that "some fundamental positions should be guaranteed, because what belongs to the intimate and personal sphere of a person should be respected".

Slovak Socialist MEP **Monika Flašíková Beňová** said "we are not talking about imposing anything to member states, but about tolerance".

British Liberal **Sarah Ludford** told the House "we have splendid principles in the treaties and legal instruments of the EU for non discrimination, equality, rights of minorities, human dignity, the right to family life, and of course the right of free movement". However, she considered that the rules "need to be amended to remove the semi-discretion that member states have to discriminate against couples where there are same sex partners or spouses moving from another State".

Austrian Green **Ulrike Lunacek** said that "we have problems when we hear that recognition has to be gradual. In every EU country citizens are more advanced than their governments".

Focus

Polish MEP **Konrad Szymansky** (ECR) noted that "some countries do not recognize gay couples, and they have the right not to". "If the State does not recognize it for anyone it is not discriminating and then this debate is a waste of time".

France and other Member States must halt expulsions of Roma immediately

Expressing "deep concern" at recent measures taken by the French authorities and other EU Member States, Parliament argued on Thursday that mass expulsions of Roma people violate EU law as they amount to discrimination on the basis of race. MEPs called on policymakers to avoid "inflammatory rhetoric" and also criticised the Council and Commission's lack of commitment on the issue.

- *resolution adopted by 337/245/51*
- *mass expulsions and collection of fingerprints illegal*
- *policymakers should avoid inflammatory and discriminatory rhetoric*
- *MEPs regret "late and limited reaction" of European Commission*

In a resolution tabled by the S&D, ALDE, Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL groups and adopted by 337 votes to 245 with 51 abstentions, Parliament says the Member States in question should immediately "suspend all expulsions of Roma".

Parliament "rejects any statements which link minorities and immigration with criminality and create discriminatory stereotypes" as well as "the inflammatory and openly discriminatory rhetoric" (...) "lending credibility to racist statements and the actions of extreme right-wing groups". MEPs also argue that fingerprinting the Roma is illegal and violates the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

EU legislation on free movement stipulates that "the lack of economic means can in no circumstances justify the automatic expulsion of EU citizens". Restrictions on freedom of movement can be imposed "solely on the basis of personal conduct, and not of general considerations of prevention or ethnic or national origin." Moreover, say MEPs, expulsion decisions must be assessed and decided on an individual basis, taking into consideration personal circumstances and guaranteeing procedural safeguards and redress.

A full analysis of the situation in France and other Member States required

Parliament also regrets the "late and limited response" by the European Commission as guardian of the treaties to the need to verify the consistency of Member States' actions with EU law. The Commission should "stand firmly behind the values and principles enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Treaties" and "respond promptly with a full analysis of the situation in France and in all the Member States", says Parliament.

Roma summit in April: only three ministers attended

MEPs regret that the Commission has thus far not responded to Parliament's requests to prepare an EU strategy on the Roma. They regret that only three ministers attended the second Roma summit, which took place in Cordoba on 8 April.

Lastly, Parliament emphasises that the situation of the Roma in Europe "can in no way affect the forthcoming accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the Schengen area, nor the rights of their citizens".

MEPs voice concerns over anti-counterfeiting agreement

- Medicines, internet among issues at stake
 - Concerns about openness of negotiations
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On Wednesday MEPs debated anti-counterfeiting agreement with trade commissioner Karel De Gucht. At less than one month from "the end of the game" many questions remain open, and the commissioner announced a possible withdraw of the EU from the deal. Why people remain unconvinced? Read the opinions of the MEPs and EP Facebook fans.

ACTA is a planned new multilateral agreement between the EU and other countries such as the US, Canada, Japan, Australia and Mexico aimed at combating infringements of intellectual property rights, for example the piracy of music, films and clothing.

Full transparency

By Thursday, a majority of MEPs had signed a written declaration calling on the Commission to make all documents relating to the ongoing negotiations publicly available. A declaration supported by more than half the total number of MEPs is deemed to represent the official position of Parliament.

The declaration argues that the agreement should not impose harmonisation of EU copyright, patent or trademark law nor weaken fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and the right to privacy.

Access to safe medicines

It emphasises that economic and innovation risks must be evaluated before introducing criminal sanctions where civil measures are already in place. In addition, ACTA should not harm global access to legal, affordable and safe medicines.

Plenary debate

In the plenary debate on 8 September, Commissioner Karel de Gucht reassured MEPs that ACTA would not be "about checking on the content of travellers' laptops or computers", and would "not lead to limitation of civil liberties or harassment of consumers".

Many MEPs showed their opposition to the confidentiality of the negotiations and the vagueness of the text. Socialist MEP Kader Arif told the House that "I want to repeat, I am not happy about the secrecy of the negotiations, want more transparency".

Green MEP Jan Philipp Albrecht said the "agreement is extremely unclear and I think that it's going to undermine EU legislation at the end of the day".

Daniel Caspary from the European People's Party said that "champagne has to be protected as much as Coca-Cola" in a reference to issues related to the origin of famous trade marks.

Mr De Gucht also said ACTA would not hamper access to generic medicines. As to transparency, he promised that the Commission would continue to keep Parliament abreast of the negotiations.

Some reactions from Parliament's Facebook fans

Nick Kossifidis: "No agreement should be discussed behind closed doors, not from the people I voted to represent me. With no public feedback and control this is how "agreements" end up."

Neville Bezzina: "ACTA is NOT about counterfeiting. It is about extending copyright enforcement and protecting obsolete business models that failed to adapt to the Internet. Also, the Internet enforcement chapter is still mostly based on the U.S. DMCA (US copyright law) and I find it terrible."

Florian Leppla: "This treaty is much more about copyright enforcement than about fake handbags (=counterfeiting). Btw I don't agree that fighting "piracy" is vital for industry and consumers. This is what copyright holders have make us to believe".

Background

Parliament adopted a resolution last March calling for the negotiations to be transparent. MEPs demanded then that no personal searches should be conducted at EU borders and that the agreement should not introduce any kind of "three strikes" internet disconnection as a penalty for three online copyright infringements.

The 10th round of ACTA negotiations was held in Washington from 16 to 20 August this year and the next round will take place in Tokyo from 23 September to 1 October.