

FEB PLENARY 2011

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**HUNGARIAN MEDIA LAW**

Hungary's government agreed to amend a new media law after sharp criticism from the EU that the legislation imposes unacceptable restrictions on freedom of expression. Following the statement by Commissioner Kroes in the Strasbourg Plenary on the negotiations with the Hungarian Government on the modifications to its Media law, S&D Group leader Martin Schulz said:

"Our relentless political pressure on both the Hungarian government and the Commission has delivered its first results. Eventually, Mr Orban had to face the hard facts and to give in. At first glance, a series of changes, some of technical natures have taken place. But other important matters, such as the composition of Media Council, are outstanding. Commissioner's Kroes response on these matters was far from satisfactory. We still need to analyse the text carefully. Media freedom is an issue of central importance to the S&D Group and we will do everything that is in our power to protect it". The Parliament decided, by a show of hands, to postpone voting its resolution on Hungary's media law, in the light of the new situation." Finally, the House decided to send a 10 Member delegation to Egypt. The date is still to be decided.

**TRANSITION IN EGYPT**

Reacting to the dizzying changes in Egypt, Members passed a resolution calling on the EU to rethink and improve its political and financial strategy to assist the country's transition to democracy, including organising free elections. They also call for a freeze on the assets of all Egyptian leaders responsible for misappropriating public funds in the country. Adrian Severin vice-president and foreign affairs spokesman of the S&D Group said in Strasbourg:

"Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament express our solidarity with the Egyptian people in their legitimate democratic aspirations. We applaud their courage and determination. The present events in Egypt prove that Islam can be not only fundamentalist but also democratic if we accept that democracy has a variable geometry and if we let it grow naturally in its own soil. If the EU does not address immediately and consistently the need to overcome the social and economic hardships in the country, the revolution might move to anarchy and from there towards another dictatorship.

"Therefore the EU should immediately take initiative to ensure the transformation in Egypt and in this context the visit of the High Representative of the EU to the region and her readiness to adapt and upgrade the necessary instruments to deal with the challenge is good news. The Egyptian armed forces must ensure an end to violence and play a constructive role in the democratic process. All political and civil society actors should be involved in reaching a national consensus."

## **CROATIA'S SUBSTANTIAL PROGRESS TOWARDS ACCESSION**

In a resolution adopted by 548 votes to 43 with 52 abstentions, European lawmakers congratulate Croatia on its "substantial progress" in introducing the reforms needed to join the EU. "Negotiations with Croatia can be completed in the first half of 2011 provided that the necessary reforms continue to be pursued resolutely", says Parliament. Although, MEPs acknowledge that major efforts have been made to change the constitution, reform the judiciary, the fight against corruption, support for returning refugees and the restructuring of shipyards are among the remaining challenges facing the country. Parliament rapporteur and S&D Group vice-president Hannes Swoboda said in Strasbourg:

"We welcome the intention of the Hungarian Presidency of the Council to successfully finish accession negotiations during the first half of this year and we are determined to help. This said, we urge the Croatian government to stick to its commitments and take the final conclusive step. In this case, as the S&D Group hopes, Croatia's membership could be a reality between 1 January 2013 at the earliest and 1 January 2014 at the latest."

"We invite the Croatian government to further strengthen the administrative capacities of anti-corruption bodies, in particular that of the Office for the Fight against Corruption and Organised Crime and to further foster a culture of political accountability. We remind the Croatian authorities of the importance of protecting the corruption investigation process from political interference. We invite the Croatian authorities to facilitate the reintegration process of returnees by further removing obstacles to obtaining permanent residence status. We finally underline the necessity to proceed quickly with the prosecution of war crimes. S&D Group asks for the updating of the Criminal Code in accordance with the highest standards of international law, especially with regard to the definition of crimes against humanity, provisions on command responsibility and the laws defining crimes of sexual violence."

## **IN SHORT**

**Humanitarian Emergency in Italy** - S&D Euro MPs called on the EU to provide financial assistance to Member States like Italy who are coping with migration flows and to support democratic consolidation in the Mediterranean region. S&D member Juan Fernando Lopez Aguilar, Chairman of the Parliament's Committee on civil liberties, justice and home affairs, said in Strasbourg: "European countries cannot be left alone to deal with immigration flows. Common shared solidarity and political will are key instruments for the EU's border management." Italian S&D delegation leader, David Sassoli pointed out that: "Over the last days, 5500 migrants are reported to have arrived to Lampedusa without finding any reception facilities. As a result of its populist 'tolerance zero', indeed, the Italian government has dismantled the local migration centre making it impossible to assist and identify people arriving on the island and to tackle illegal immigration. The EU must support Italy also on a financial level provided that the EU migration policy is fully respected and implemented. S&D member Antonio Panzeri, chair of the EP delegation on Maghreb and who recently went on a mission to Tunisia, said to the press: "This emergency also highlights that the EU must review its neighbourhood policy and support the democratic consolidation in the Mediterranean region."

**Green Light for a FTA with South Korea** - Following two and a half years of negotiations, European lawmakers gave the green light for ratification to the EU's Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with South Korea by 465 in favour, 128 against and 19 abstentions. The FTA with South Korea will eliminate about 98% of import duties and other trade barriers in manufactured goods, agricultural products and services over the next 5 years. The FTA will double the value of trade in goods between the EU and South Korea to around 100 billion euros a year boosting jobs and growth. A Safeguard clause was also adopted with amendments by 495 in favour, 16 against and no abstentions. The clause will allow the EU to suspend further reductions in customs duties or increase them to previous levels, if lower rates lead to an excessive increase in imports from South Korea, causing or threatening to cause "serious injury" to EU producers. The EU also gained guarantees from Seoul that new Korean legislation on automobile CO<sub>2</sub> emissions will not have an adverse effect on Europe's car makers.

**New CO<sub>2</sub> Cuts** - The House signed off on new carbon dioxide restrictions for commercial vans to cut fuel costs and limit emissions blamed for global warming. The EP voted for new rules that will require automakers to limit CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from new light commercial vehicles by 14 percent to an average 175 gram/kilometre by 2017. The legislation sets an emissions target of 147 gram/kilometre by 2020, a 28% reduction from 2007 levels. The S&D Group welcomed the new regulation to limit CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from commercial vans to 147 gram/km by 2020, but regretted that the EU was not able to reach a more ambitious target.

**Pension Reforms** - Member States must act to ensure that pension schemes can sustainably deliver an adequate income to the EU's growing number of retired people, despite the economic crisis, says an EP resolution adopted in Strasbourg. Pension portability must also be addressed, as must inequalities faced by women and older workers, stress MEPs. At present there are four people of working age for every person over 65, by 2060 there will be just two" says a Commission Green Paper, to which the EP's resolution is a response. The S&D Group managed to delete a reference to rise the statutory retirement age on the basis of life-expectancy. The resolution was approved by 535 votes to 85 with 57 abstentions.

**Economic Governance** - Stronger economic governance and firm budget commitments for concrete measures are the main demands set out in a resolution on the Europe 2020 strategy adopted by Parliament on Thursday. Separately, MEPs endorsed the 2011 EU guidelines for the Member States' employment policies but also called for the employment policy guidelines to be better implemented in future, with an emphasis on more and better jobs for European workers. Parliament also approved a report drafted by S&D Group Member and Chair of the Employment and Social Affairs Committee, Pervenche Berès on the 2011 EU guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States, by 551 votes to 59 with 8 abstentions.

**Fake Medicines** - A new law to prevent fake medicines from entering the legal supply chain was approved by the EP. The report was adopted with 569 votes in favour, 12 against and 7 abstentions. Internet sales will be covered by the law, which also introduces new safety and traceability measures, as well as sanctions against counterfeiters. This law still needs to be formally approved by the Council of Ministers.

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