**Foreign Affairs Council meeting of 18 October 2021**

**Full Report**

The Foreign Affairs Council meeting of 18 October 2021 discussed the Gulf, the Eastern Partnership, Ethiopia and Nicaragua. Under Current Affairs, the following issues were addressed: Afghanistan, Tunisia, Western Balkans, Climate Diplomacy and Varosha. The High Representative also debriefed on his recent mission to the US. Ministers raised Mali, Belarus, Libya, Egypt and Israel. No AOBs were raised. The Council adopted Conclusions on EUFOR Althea. In his introduction, the High Representative also drew attention to the upcoming Sixth Regional Forum of the Union for the Mediterranean and the Ministerial Meeting between the EU and Southern Partner Foreign Ministers, both on 29 November in Barcelona.

**Discussion Items**

**Gulf**

The High Representative debriefed the FAC on his recent outreach to the Gulf and discussed with Ministers the future EU approach to the region. There was strong consensus among Member States on the importance of scaling up EU engagement. Especially in a context of increased influence of other actors as China, Turkey and Russia.

Member States shared the assessment of the High Representative regarding the changing dynamics following the Abraham accords, GCC normalization and Iran/Saudi talks which offer opportunities, but also recognized tensions are still present that risk escalation. Ministers therefore expressed strong appreciation for the latest HR/VP visit to the region and welcomed the broader EU outreach including bilateral cooperation arrangements and human rights dialogues. The EEAS issues paper was also broadly welcomed. There was general support for the fact that the momentum should be seized as a matter of priority (in particular MT, CY, ES and LU).

Member States also agreed on the importance of expanding diplomatic presence and CY, IE, SE, FI, DE, RO and SI particularly welcomed the planned opening of new EU delegations in the region (Qatar, followed by Oman). In addition, SE (supported by ES, LU and BE) proposed the appointment of a dedicated EU special envoy to the Gulf, which could facilitate enhanced engagement with the Gulf partners. Some Member States (BG, MT) also highlighted the need to work on bilateral relations with each of the Gulf countries, apart from the overall regional approach.

Several Ministers (IE, SE, CZ, BE, BG, SK, IT, CY and SI) underlined the need to strengthen dialogue with Gulf partners on regional issues. In particular, the important mediating role of Qatar on Afghanistan was highlighted, from support for evacuations, as well as on potential terrorism and migration spill over. Member States (IE, EL SE, FI, DE, PL, CZ, IT, FR, BE, EE and ES) further highlighted the importance of the timely resumption of the JCPOA negotiations and appreciated ongoing EU efforts, but also expressed concern on possible delays. The High Representative mentioned the latest contacts with Iran and their presumed willingness to resume negotiations ‘soon’.

The relevance of engaging on other regional issues was also mentioned (notably Yemen, Syria, Libya, the Horn of Africa, Sahel), as well as on the fight against terrorism. HU, PL, HR and SK highlighted the importance of the Abraham Accords that normalized relations with Israel and expressed hope that other Gulf countries would follow the example of UAE and Bahrein. LU however noted that the stability of the region was dependent on whether the Palestinians could be granted a state.

RO, PL and BG also called for better coordination with Gulf partners on irregular migration, with PL making specific reference to the Belarus border crisis. SI suggested engaging more with Gulf partners on people-to-people contacts and facilitating access to Schengen.

Commissioner Várhelyi underlined the importance of encouraging Gulf partners to take an active role as humanitarian and development donors, in support of tackling crises in the region as Syria, Yemen as well as the situation in Gaza. The Commission made reference to the possible role the Gulf states could play in the financing of UNWRA in this regards. DE supported this in particular and called for stronger engagement from Gulf donors. Specifically on Yemen, EE expressed support to the UN-led progress (welcoming the appointment of the new special envoy) but also regretted that the mandate of the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen was not extended.

Member States broadly welcomed confidence-building measures in areas as maritime safety and security (in particular DK, BE, FR). DK mentioned the strong track-record of Emasoh as a possible building block in that area. Other areas of cooperation with the Gulf countries could include climate change, green transition, energy and the digital agenda.

Members States fully supported the proposal of re-engaging on a FTA with the GCC and the planned Cooperation Council meeting could pave the way for resuming negotiations. PT noted the need to be realistic and coherent vis-à-vis other regions and gave the example of overdue resumptions of trade negotiations with India.

HU suggested caution not to confuse FTA negotiations with political issues and possible criticism on human rights and values. Similarly, HU also suggested not using the occasion of the World Cup to interfere in domestic Qatari issues related to human rights and migrant workers, whereas DK suggested to voice concern on the latter. In a similar vein, IE, SE and LU highlighted the importance of engaging with Gulf states on human rights.

Regarding concrete follow up, the High Representative took note of the ideas raised in the discussion, noting that there was clear support for further engagement with the region. These will feed into the work on the Joint Communication. The High Representative recalled that he had extended an invitation to the Secretary-General of the GCC to Brussels to discuss prospects for relaunching the FTA negotiations. He also recalled the invitation extended to the Qatari Foreign Minister to an upcoming meeting of the FAC to exchange views on Afghanistan. It was also noted that preparations should be taken forward on the holding of an EU-GCC Cooperation Council early next year. The High Representative welcomed the proposal of appointing a dedicated envoy for the Gulf. Finally, he also briefly touched on the recently held elections in Iraq, noting that this was an important step in the consolidation of Iraq’s democracy and long-term stability. A preliminary report by the Election Observation Mission has been issued and the situation will continue to be monitored.

**Eastern Partnership**

The High Representative introduced the discussion item ahead of the Eastern Partnership Summit, highlighting its difficult geopolitical context and increasingly active regional players. He also referred to the current energy crisis in Moldova, which confirmed that Russia was intent on using “energy as a weapon”. The EU was in contact with Moldovan authorities, mobilising expertise to help the Moldovan government on alternatives for gas supply, as well as accelerating procedures for financial assistance. The upcoming EU-Moldova Association Council on 28 October would be the opportunity to publicly reinforce this signal of support. In general, EaP countries looked for EU support and strengthened engagement and had high expectations from the Summit seeking a new vision for the Eastern Partnership policy. They also expected the EU to facilitate access to vaccines and recognise their digital COVID certificates.

The High Representative thus proposed a focus on recovery, resilience and reform. If the EU wanted to remain a relevant player in the region, it needed to shift the gear and deliver, enhance the attractiveness of its offer to consolidate partners’ European choices, including with regard to security. In this respect, the High Representative suggested the EU could consider possibilities in the context of the European Peace Facility and PESCO. On democratic transformation, the EU must continue to insist on the fundamental principles and to push for reforms. The EaP must remain inclusive, although the EU should not shy away from further differentiation to keep interested partners motivated, also in the multilateral framework. The EU should explore options for enhanced cooperation with the associated partners, for example in the areas of connectivity, environment, health, or digital. Finally, the High Representative referred to the ongoing efforts to counter disinformation by strengthening the capacities of our delegations on the ground.

Commissioner Várhelyi indicated the need to start work on a clear agenda and common engagement with partners, by working on tangible projects of the new EaP agenda and focusing on the two pillars of investments and governance, building a robust communication campaign and investing in security and resilience of partner countries. On security, investing in substantial efforts is key, with the need to focus on cyber, energy security, resilience against corruption and disinformation; the Commissioner indicated readiness to allocate more funding for security should there be a bigger uptake from our partners and increased commitment.

All Member States highlighted the importance of the Summit in December and the importance of having a Joint Declaration. Some Member States expressed appreciation for the draft declaration circulated in Coreper (DK, CZ), and the need for a short and balanced text. A number of countries referred to the need to stick to agreed language in the text especially on aspirations of partners (EE, SE), while others (LT, SK) asked for a stronger geopolitical role of the EU in the region (CZ, SK, PL) and the need to be bolder and more ambitious, and to acknowledge the “Trio” initiative of the associated countries (CZ). They all agreed that the drive of partner countries for reforms should continue. Armenia and Azerbaijan’s role for a successful Summit including the declaration was highlighted by CZ, and LT proposed to invite the foreign ministers of the two countries to a future FAC meeting to kick-start the dialogue.

Member States concurred on the importance of the Eastern Partnership. They widely welcomed the EaP agenda post-2020, its focus on resilience and post-Covid recovery and the Economic and Investment Plan, and particularly stressed the importance of the principle of conditionality and “more-for-more”. The fundamentals of the rule of law, good governance, human rights, democracy and anti-corruption as the basis of the Eastern Partnership were particularly highlighted by a large number of Member States, with some of them asking for a monitoring mechanism of reforms and advances in partner countries (SI, HR, NL).

Other priorities such as green transition, energy, climate change, environment, health, youth and digitalization were also widely mentioned, along with transport connectivity (BG), education and skills (MT) and gender equality (SE). Decrease of roaming prices was also mentioned as an important deliverable for citizens (HR, PL).

The discussion also highlighted support for the need for more security cooperation on cyber security and hybrid threats, energy security and fight against disinformation. Some Member States (notably EE) stated their interest to go beyond these issues and cooperate with partners in the PESCO and EPF frameworks, while others clearly stated their opposition to the extension of the EaP framework beyond these issues (BE). The role of other countries such as Russia, Turkey and China in the region was also highlighted (LT), as well as the importance of the equivalence of the two geographical dimensions of the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood (ES).

On the notion of differentiation and inclusivity for the EaP, most Member States pleaded to continue with an inclusive and flexible framework and highlighted the importance of associated partners to deliver on the current Association Agreements and DCFTAs. The “Trio” initiative of the associated partner countries (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) was highlighted in particular, with some Member States asking for more differentiation, sectoral cooperation and economic integration in the EU markets for these countries (RO, BG, LV, LT, CZ, SK), and others clearly supporting inclusivity and in some cases rejecting sub-formats for the Eastern Partnership (FI, EE, NL, FR, BE).

On Moldova, Member States expressed full support for the country and its government in light of the energy crisis (FI, RO, DE, LT, CZ, PL, FR). In this context, HU referred to the renewal of their agreement with Russia on gas supply (10+5 years) and to ensuing protests by Ukraine about it. HU stressed that Member States should work on strengthening energy and gas interconnectors between them, also highlighting that Azerbaijan is increasing the volume of gas they can deliver and that the EU could ask them for more.

On Belarus, Member States regretted the decision of the regime to suspend the country from the Eastern Partnership. At the same time, there was a widespread agreement on the “empty chair” policy for Belarus at the Summit, and NL expressed readiness to support new sanctions. There was also support for DE’s suggestion to invite the Belarusian civil society and democratic opposition to side events in the margins of the Summit.

Two Member States (EL and CY) referred to the need for Azerbaijan to respect international agreements and initiate a process of building diplomatic relations with CY. FR referred to the intention to organize a ministerial meeting in the Normandy format together with DE, and the possibility to restart dialogue with Armenia and Azerbaijan following the conflict and a first recent meeting in New York.

The High Representative concluded the discussion by stressing the EU’s strong commitment to the Eastern Partnership and the need to make the Summit in December a success. He also highlighted the need to maintain the positive spirit of the discussion today in going forward. He further highlighted the importance of fundamentals such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law and anti-corruption, socio-economic recovery, cooperation on cyber and against hybrid threats and disinformation, support for partner countries on vaccines and vaccine certificates, preserving the right balance between differentiation and inclusivity and reinforcing conditionality. While ambitions differ on the side of Member States, it is important to send a strong message of unity, increase the resilience of partners and keep them motivated. The inclusivity of the partnership remains key, with reforms as a prerequisite, the Joint Communication and the Joint Staff Working Document as bases, and the Economic and Investment Plan as a flagship initiative which can act as a key driver for long-term transformation. The High Representative also briefly referred to the situation at the EU’s eastern border in the context of the situation with Belarus as well as to the assertive attitude of Russia. Lastly, on Belarus and the “empty chair”, the High Representative announced he would convey the views of Member States to the President of the European Council, in charge of preparations for the Summit in December.

**Ethiopia**

In his opening remarks, the High Representative stressed that the topic was highly political and EU had to decide on what to do. In a few days, the joint OHCHR/EHRC report would be released, also marking the first anniversary of the start of the conflict in Tigray. Questions to be asked included: what has EU done? And what would it do to address one of the most serious crisis in Africa? There had been no progress on the resolution of the crisis. Both parties seemed to be pursuing a military solution and the perspective of political talks was very slim. The situation was highly volatile, which affected the whole region and which could jeopardise the unity of Ethiopia.

The humanitarian situation was catastrophic and Tigray was under siege. The worst-case famine scenario was getting closer and the Government was increasingly negative towards relief organizations and was politicising humanitarian assistance. The declaration of seven UN officials as “Persona Non Grata” was just the latest episode. The second flight of EU’s Humanitarian Air Bridge was successful.

The EU should continue efforts through the Humanitarian Air Bridge, while also working on reopening the road access. Important to define a common EU position and implement a stronger collective political and financial pressure, in close coordination with Bretton woods institutions. On accountability for human rights violations, the Council should discuss the appropriateness of restrictive measures. On the possibility of proximity talks and national dialogue, it would be crucial to see how common pressure could be exerted towards all actors to engage them into proximity talks and launch a political dialogue. The High Representative also highlighted that it was important to support the work of AUSR Obasanjo.

The Commission (Commissioner Urpilainen) informed that she would be heading to Addis on 25 October for a joint mission together with EUSR for the Horn of Africa Weber. She would meet with the Ethiopian Government to pass EU messages. She noted the EU had been leading the front to gather the international community around few ‘key asks’: unhindered humanitarian access, cessation of hostilities, investigation and accountability. These ‘key asks’ represented a common ground for the EU, and it had reached athere is a common understanding that the EU could not finance a war economy.

Some successes could be recorded with regard to EU ‘asks’: the joint OHCHR/EHRC report to be published on 1 November will be an important milestone. The successful second attempt of an EU Humanitarian Air Bridge was a gleam of hope, but overall the EU should recognise the collective failure so far to reach a concerted position and act collectively. The EU was also witnessing another escalation of the conflict, following the announcement of the new government. Ethiopia was and the EU wants it to remain a strategic partner of the EU, and had an interest in the ambitious reform agenda of Prime Minister Abiy. The EU wanted to go back to the Strategic Engagement it had with Ethiopia since 2016 and until the Tigray conflict erupted. However, it was faced with challenges that played as impeding blocks: the conflict in Tigray, the spread of hate speech and violence based on ethnicity. Those two challenges were the cause of suffering for millions of Ethiopians, posed a threat to the stability of the country and the region and hampered the implementation of reforms. The message to Ethiopian authorities would thus be ‘help us to help you’. The EU hasd a broad toolbox, including sanctions that it could use. EU cooperation funds under NDICI-Global Europe were part of the discussion. COM would reiterate the need to see concrete efforts within a specific timeline from the Government to advance on our ‘key asks’; unhindered humanitarian access being the most pressing one. Resuming budget support should be linked to a cessation of hostilities in a gradual step-by-step approach. In this spirit, the Commissioner proposed that EU and EU Member States support a new IMF programme only after the cessation of all hostilities.

MS taking the floor (IE, FI, NL, DK, EL, HU, EE, RO, DE, PT, ES, SI, LU, CY, IT, SE, BE and FR) shared the analyses, expressed their concern about the worsening situation and reiterated their support to increasing pressure on key priorities outlined in the joint EEAS-COM non-paper (humanitarian access, cessation of hostilities, accountability for human rights violations, withdrawal of foreign troops). IE, NL and DE stressed that EU impact has so far been limited. NL emphasized that patience on political solution has not led anywhere. IE stressed that it is important to make decisions.

IE, NL, DE, LU and CY called for EU unity and clear communication. For NL and DE, EU needs to communicate clearly what our expectations are and if not met, what are the consequences. MS (IE, FI, DK and DE) emphasized the need to maintain the dialogue and welcomed the joint visit of Commissioner Urpilainen and EUSR Weber (IE, FI and DE) expressing readiness to increase financial pressure (FI, DK, EL, EE, IT, SE), while respecting “do no harm” approach (FI and NL). ES and FR stressed that the EU should continue the programming exercise. Aid had to be recalibrated to the most vulnerable populations without feeding the economy of war.

While many MS (IE, FI, NL, DK, EE, RO, DE, PT, LU, SE and BE) expressed their readiness to consider restrictive measures, IT was against them, referring to a possibility of a counterproductive impact. According to IT, results should be achieved via financial pressure. DK, PT and SI stressed that the OHCHR/EHRC report will be an important milestone. IE noted that OHCHR/EHRC report should give evidence. DK and BE referred to possible reputational risks if the EU does not quickly react to the report. IE expressed readiness to start preparatory work for listings, using the EU global human rights sanctions regime (EUGHRSR). DE and LU underscored that individual sanctions would not be enough; also financial instruments are needed to increase pressure. RO stressed that investigations must continue also after the OHCHR/EHRC report. EL (supported by DE) wondered whether PM Abiy’s Nobel Peace Prize could be taken away from him.

EE and SE highlighted the importance of proximity talks. IE, DK, EL and SE stressed the collaboration and coordination with regional and international partners, including the US (DK, EL and SE). Several MS (IE, FI, EL, PT, ES and BE) expressed their support for the work of AUSR Obasanjo. According to FI, EU should encourage Obasanjo to speak also with the opposition. ES stressed importance of African solution. IE noted that it is important to keep Ethiopia also on the agenda of UNSC. Several MS (FI, EL, RO, ES, IT and SE) condemned the expulsion of seven UN officials and welcomed the Declaration by the HR on behalf of the EU on this.

FI and EL reminded that it was important to investigate the source of the weapons. According to EL, Turkey was providing drones to the Ethiopian government. FI referred to the impacts on Sudan and that proxy actions were very likely, caused by Eritrea and other actors. It was thus important to support the stability of Sudan. HU (supported by CY and EL) referred to Egypt and emphasized that the EU was protected by migratory flows only if northern African countries were stable enough and willing to cooperate with the EU. There was strong movement from Ethiopia to Egypt. EU should revise its support to Ethiopia and help the country to secure its southern border in order to avoid migratory flows to Europe.

The High Representative concluded that the EU needs to step up efforts to define a coordinated EU position and subsequently, implement a stronger collective political and financial pressure on all parties. The High Representative also stressed that it was crucial to increase humanitarian aid. Development cooperation should target the most affected and fragile parts of the population. The High Representative also took note of the support for continuing close cooperation and coordination with regional and international actors, in particular the US and AUSR Obasanjo. The High Representative also noted that it would be important to start considering the response to the OHCHR/EHRC report that will be published, including possible targeted sanctions. Meanwhile, Commissioner Urpilainen would visit Addis to pass EU messages. On Egypt, the EU had recognized the efforts the country is making in controlling irregular migration. Nevertheless, it was difficult to make a U-turn when it came to EU assistance. Commissioners Johansson and Varhelyi are expected to travel to Cairo soon and EUSR Gilmore will follow up on human rights issues.

**Nicaragua**

The High Representative referred to recent developments in Nicaragua, which had become ever more authoritarian and where, in the run-up to elections on 7 November, the Government had silenced dissenting voices and persecuted and jailed political opponents. The High Representative suggested five strategic lines in order to achieve the objectives of rejecting Ortega’s authoritarianism while maintaining EU engagement. Firstly, immediately following the elections, the EU needed to come out with a strong statement to make clear that the electoral process was not free, transparent nor credible, and will continue our policies based on respect for democracy, human rights and rule of law. Secondly, the EU had put restrictive measures on fourteen individuals and could convey the possibility of further sanctions. Thirdly, the EU should continue our cooperation in Nicaragua, but not with Nicaragua’s government, in order to support the most vulnerable groups. Fourthly, the EU could float the option of suspending the trade part of the EU-Central America Association only for Nicaragua, and be suspended for a number of selected tariff lines. Fifthly, the EU could considering calibrated restrictions on Nicaragua’s support from International Financial Institutions (IFIs).

The Commission (Commissioner Urpilainen) noted that the implementation of EU cooperation was ongoing in spite of the challenging environment, with ongoing programmes progressing according to plan. The Commission highlighted that it would be important to continue cooperation in order to preserve democratic space, support civil society and grass roots organisations to safeguard human rights, and promote EU interests and values. The Multi-Annual Indicative Programme offered the possibility of a flexible approach. The Commission hoped for MS support in line with the Team Europe approach.

ES stressed the importance of a credible EU approach, underlining that other countries in the region were following developments and assessing implications for the EU’s commitment to the region. Recalling the steps that ES has taken in reaction to the situation in Nicaragua, ES highlighted that the EU would have to coordinate and encourage other countries – i.a. the US – to take action (supported by CZ, SE and by LU, who also referred to Canada and other partners in the region), including by withdrawing Ambassadors. The EU needed to take further action after the elections, including with regard to international finance such as the World Bank Group. The EU also needed to support civil society (PT, LU). After the elections, a clear and hard-hitting declaration is needed (supported by all intervening Member States). This should not offer space for dialogue, since that would only be used by the regime to buy time and legitimacy. There needed to be conditions, including the release of political prisoners (also LU, SE), end of the police state and protection of human rights. ES (supported by PT) also supported the use of further restrictive measures, noting that sanctions needed to target President Ortega’s inner circle and the President himself. SE and CZ also stood ready to discuss broadening the sanctions list.

PT agreed with the approach proposed by the High Representative – maximum pressure on the regime and no legitimacy for the outcome of the election. At the same time, the EU needed to avoid two mistakes it had made with regard to Venezuela: 1) inventing an alternative legitimacy in case of illegitimate elections and 2) confusing recognition of the legitimacy of a power with not recognising the existence of a de facto power (supported by SE).

LU (who spoke also on behalf of BE and NL) highlighted the need to find the right balance between pressure on the regime and discreet diplomacy. It was also noted that the options paper presented remains valid and should be pursued. LU agreed on the need to continue to support the most vulnerable in the society, and was against participation at any inauguration ceremony. LU recalled that the EU should stick to its established position on recognising states. CZ agreed that the EU should proceed with non-recognition.

SE expressed grave concern on Nicaragua’s total ban on abortion, even in the case of rape.

The High Representative took note of the interventions and called for strategic patience as the unresolved situation in Nicaragua could persevere for a long time to come. The High Representative highlighted the need for the EU’s approach to allow for re-engagement and to play a positive role in the event that an opening appeared after the elections, while remaining clear-eyed about the true nature of the regime.

**Current Affairs**

Under Current Affairs, the High Representative referred firstly to **Afghanistan**, where the humanitarian and economic situation continues to deteriorate. The urgency was also reflected by Commission President von der Leyen at the G20 Summit. A second mission was in Kabul to explore how and when the EU could establish a minimal presence to support the Afghan people and ensure safe passage for Afghans at risk. The EEAS also has a presence in Doha. On the Regional Platform, outreach continued to regional actors who had specific concerns and needs, using the combined strengths of the MS and the EU. Neighbours already coordinated among themselves and with Russia, which posed challenges. The High Representative also referred to Qatar, which was positioning itself as a diplomatic hub both vis-à-vis the Taliban, the region and the international community. Finally, the High Representative made the plea to offer the necessary visas so former EUPOL local agents and their relatives can be evacuated from Kabul. The EEAS would write to MS making this request.

Responding to the High Representative, ES, EE, DK, MT and SE agreed that the situation on the ground was of concern and a socio-economic collapse needed to be prevented, with BE,SE and LU referring specifically to education for girls. The added value of a minimal EU presence was acknowledged e.g. for the provision of humanitarian+ aid and coordination of evacuations (ES, BE, SE) security conditions should be met (DK, NL, who also asked for a debrief of the exploratory mission to Kabul). Member States (BE, NL, FR, DE) were also clear that such a presence should in no way be construed as recognition, which the High Representative acknowledged and confirmed would not be the case. Several Member States referred to the need to judge the Taliban regime by its actions and not by words, with recent signals being rather worrying (ES, EE, BE, DK, NL, DE, FR). The need for the established benchmarks to be upheld was highlighted. DE and NL did however make the point that contacts with the Taliban were necessary, also to ensure that support is provided for evacuations. In this context, ES and SE drew attention to the need for continued efforts to repatriate European nationals and collaborators. ES, SE, BE and DK highlighted the importance of regional outreach, with ES and SE referring to the efforts to launch a Regional Platform. SE referred to the need to cooperate with regional partners on migration, while EE also referred to the need for cooperation in order to contain any terrorist threat. EE noted it was working on strengthening international cooperation at the UN Security Council and welcomed the extension of UNAMA. SI stressed the need for inter-institutional coordination on Afghanistan.

On **Tunisia**, the High Representative debriefed Ministers on his call with Tunisian President Saïed where he passed strong messages on the need for separation of powers and the importance of preserving the democratic acquis, also with a view to institutional normalcy. The appointment of a new Head of Government and a new set of ministers were welcome but their impact remains to be seen. President Saïed insisted on the fact that exceptional measures are only temporary and that he intends to close this parenthesis as soon as possible. The High Representative however noted that the call had also confirmed the importance that Tunisia places on its relationship with the EU, which gives the EU leverage. The High Representative called for a reflection on possible options in terms of keeping communication channels open, while continuing to support the population and pass messages on the urgency of respect for democracy and the rule of law.

Interventions (ES, BE, PT, BG, FR, MT, EL and the Commission) showed support to the messages outlined by the High Representative, and agreed that the EU should remain engaged. The need to work with Tunisia was also stressed (FR, the Commission), as was the need for the EU to act prudently (MT). A defined calendar and roadmap towards parliamentary elections are needed to ensure that Tunisian democracy is preserved (ES, FR, the Commission, MT). In this respect, a number of Member States called for an inclusive political dialogue with the involvement of all components of the population, including civil society (PT, FR, MT). In this regard, the need for balanced and coordinated messaging was highlighted (FR, RO), with some Member States raising the possibility of Declaration by the HR on behalf of the EU (BG, RO). PT also suggested that the High Representative mandate certain Member States to visit Tunisia to engage with all parties with a view to convincing them of need to preserve democratic environment.

With regard to the **Western Balkans,** there continued to be a need to visibly strengthen EU engagement with the region. The High Representative expressed his appreciation for the proposals that had been provided. With regard to the north of Kosovo, an agreement had been reached on vehicle license plates, which seemed to be holding. Last week, however, tensions had led to violent clashes and several injured in Mitrovica. The High Representative was in touch with President Vucic and PM Kurti. The EU-facilitated Dialogue was the only way forward. He expressed his concern with regard ongoing attempts to undermine state institutions and was actively working with the EUSR to re-establish a dialogue between the parties. BiH would only be able to join the EU as a united, single and sovereign country.

In their interventions, Ministers agreed that the regional security situation was of concern as regional tensions were on the rise (HR, AT, EL, BG, SE, RO, SI, CZ, HU) and were supportive of a full discussion on the Western Balkans at an upcoming FAC meeting. Member States (RO, BG, SE) referred in particular to the increased tensions between Serbia and Kosovo (where the efforts of the High Representative and EUSR Lajcak to resolve the Serbia- Kosovo crisis were appreciated), as well as to worrying developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina (HR, HU, AT). AT and SK also referred to the transformative power of enlargement in this regard.

Next, the High Representative referred to **climate diplomacy**, where there had been encouraging developments in the run up to COP26, although gaps persisted with regard to mitigation and finance. The EEAS was jointly delivering the COP26 demarche in more than 55 countries, in order to maintain maximum diplomatic pressure on G20 major emitters not having communicated more ambitious objectives. Finally, the High Representative stated that the world was abandoning carbon-intensive resources faster than it was investing in renewable resources, which was leading to a spike in energy prices. China was furthermore acquiring an increased volume of global gas supplies. Energy security and pricing thus constituted a geopolitical issue, which should be discussed at an upcoming FAC meeting, possibly with the participation of ministers responsible for energy.

On COP26, ES, DK, NL and IE warned that gaps existed with regard to funding and political will. For the latter, the EU needed to engage with big emitters and align with potential allies. HU stressed the need to consider natural gas as a transition fuel, and nuclear energy as a sustainable way of energy generation. BE, EL, DK and NL agreed that energy prices constituted a major geopolitical issue to be addressed at the latest by the November FAC. DK stressed the need to phase out coal. IE stated that many developing countries would be looking at the EU for guidance.

The High Representative then explained how the situation in **Varosha** remained worrying and that there had been no reversal of the unacceptable actions from July. The only durable solution to the issues was a Cyprus settlement in line with relevant UN Security Council Resolutions and the principles on which the EU had been founded. Turkey must commit and contribute for this to happen. The High Representative proposed to task the EEAS to draft a policy paper/ options paper detailing possible actions if the situation did not improve by the next months.

CY recalled the developments in Varosha since Ministers had last met formally, referring in particular to the visit of President Erdogan as well as the reactions to it (HR/VP Statement, UNSC Statement, Declaration by the HR on behalf of the EU). CY noted that the situation on the ground was not positive, referring to continued “provocations” in the area, which represented a lack of respect on Turkey’s part. Noting that the Declaration by the HR on behalf of the EU was clear on considering actions in the event of non-reversal, CY welcomed the HRVP’s proposal for a policy paper / options paper, as not having a results oriented discussion would be discrediting to the EU. Looking at all available options before the November FAC is a minimum. CY also took the opportunity to refer to recent developments in the Eastern Mediterranean where Turkish warships had harassed a Maltese-flagged, Italian-operated survey vessel while it was working as part of an EU funded PCI that will contribute to energy diversification. CY noted that the incident took place between Egypt and CY (22 nautical miles off CY), with the closest Turkish shore being 112 nautical miles away. This was another example of the need to send a clear message. ES, EE, BE, EL, LV, IE, FR and LU expressed solidarity with CY. BE, EL, LV, IE, FR, SI and LU supported a more active approach, including a position paper / options paper. MT intervened to note that contacts had taken place at Ministerial level on the issue of the MT flagged ship.

Finally, the High Representative debriefed on his **visit to Washington, D.C.,** where he had met with Secretary of State Blinken and Deputy Secretary of Defence Hicks. All had agreed on the importance of implementation of the joint agenda as set out in the June EU-US Summit statement. The High Representative had raised the importance of having an early warning mechanism in place to avoid misunderstandings and surprises. Mr. Blinken and the High Representative had agreed to build on this further with several important foreign and security policy initiatives, to launch EU-US consultations on the Indo-Pacific with a first meeting to take place by the end of 2021, to hold the first meeting under the High-level EU-US Dialogue on Russia still this year and to start preparations for launching an EU-US dialogue on security and defence. During his talks with Deputy Secretary Hicks, the High Representative had spoken on the shared transatlantic security challenges, whereby the US recognised the importance of a stronger Europe for the security of the Euro-Atlantic area.

**Ministers raised additional items:**

On **Mali**, several Ministers (FR, EE, DK, SE, RO, IT) expressed their concern with regard to the deteriorating situation in the country, including the reports of a possible security cooperation agreement with the Wagner Group. There was support for a future discussion on this soon. EE, SE, and RO were in favour of establishing a sanctions regime for those disrupting the transition process. FR called for launching legal work on sanctions on transition authorities to be used if the necessary decisions are not taken. While not outrightly opposing a sanctions regime, IT highlighted that it would nevertheless be preferable to hear EUSR del Re’s report of the situation on the ground. The High Representative highlighted the need for consistency and coherence in the EU’s use of sanctions in this regard, but noted that this possibility could be further looked into, also in view of the discussion on the Sahel foreseen for the November FAC meeting.

PL referred to recent developments at its border with **Belarus**, which it argued constituted a hybrid attack against Europe. PL had registered over 16.000 illegal border crossings since August. PL made the point that while over 2000 people had been placed in reception centres this week, they did not apply for international protection, as they wanted to do it in other Member States. Groups of more than 100 persons were storming the border, as supported by the BY authorities. The situation is expected to worsen, and BY is directly responsible for this by facilitating the transfer to the border for people that arrive to Minsk on flights via Istanbul, Dubai and others. This was echoed by LT, who also referred to flights via Syria and Iraq. PL and LT called for a proactive approach with countries of origin and transit along the lines of the good results achieved by the High Representative and the EEAS with Iraq. DE, BE, and IE also agreed on the need to take action, and flagged increased movements across the PL-DE border. While acknowledging that the situation at the border was an EU problem, IE also recalled that the EU has international legal responsibility to protect vulnerable migrants. The High Representative confirmed that outreach efforts with countries of interest would continue, with six priority countries having been identified from a list of 23 countries for further action that has just been conducted through the network of EU Delegations. The Commission (Commissioner Várhelyi) also noted that it would engage in outreach with neighbouring countries and highlighted the need to encourage third countries to screen outbound traffic to Minsk. The Commission also recalled the support provided to the affected Member States and in reaction to the situation, including the partial suspension of visa facilitation with Belarus.

PL, LT, LV, SK and EL called for action to be taken against airlines and travel operators that facilitate such flights towards Minsk (LU also agreed that options to exert pressure should be looked into), as well as the development of a fifth sanctions package (also EE, CZ, SK, IE, DE, RO), ideally by the November FAC. LV recalled that the internal situation in Belarus continued to deteriorate. Agreement on the fifth package was therefore appropriate. Both on the possibilities for pressure on airlines and traveloperators and on the fifth package, IT noted that there were complications at this stage. PL also called for further sectoral sanctions as contingency. PL also called for a Declaration by the HR on behalf of the EU and strong language in the European Council Conclusions, as well as efforts with partners towards the freezing of Belarus’ IMF special drawing rights. Belarus needed to be held accountable (also BG). On the sanctioning of airlines and/or travel operators proposed by some Member States during the discussion, the High Representative recalled that civil aviation operated within its own framework and therefore required further evaluation, but committed to work towards this, also with the support of the Commissioner responsible for transport and relevant Commission services.

With regard to **Libya**, FR highlighted the need for continued support towards the holding of elections, proposing the idea for an EU Electoral Observation Mission (also DE). The need to continue to show support for different processes (including the withdrawal of foreign fighters and mercenaries) and address regional implications was also raised.

On **Israel**, CZ recalled the FAC lunch with Israeli Foreign Minister Lapid and was in favour of convening an EU-Israel Association Council at the earliest convenience (supported by HR, EL, BG, SE, RO and SI). IE (supported by LU) stated that having an agreed EU position would be a precondition for convening this. The High Representative also agreed that at as a first step, it was important to need to work on establishing conditions for this to be held and then to see if they are met.

In the context of Ethiopia, HU, CY and EL referred to **Egypt** and emphasized that the EU is protected by migratory flows only if northern African countries are stable enough and willing to cooperate with the EU. There would be strong movement from Ethiopia to Egypt, hence the EU should revise its support to Ethiopia and help the country to secure its southern border in order to avoid migratory flows to Europe. The High Representative responded that the EU had recognized the efforts the country is making in controlling irregular migration. Nevertheless, he noted it would be difficult to make a U-turn on what comes to EU assistance. The EU was in touch with Egypt. Commissioners Johansson and Várhelyi are expected to travel to Cairo soon, and EUSR Gilmore will follow up on human rights issues.

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