

Minister of State for European Affairs and Defence, Peter Burke, TD

Joint Committee on European Union Affairs

11 October 2023

Opening Statement

I am very pleased to be back before the Committee to report on the two most recent meetings of the General Affairs Council which I attended.

The regular General Affairs Council took place on 19 September with the main item for discussion preparation of the European Council which will take place on 26-27 October. The intention at this stage is that the European Council will focus on four principal issues, namely Ukraine, the mid-term review of the EU Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF), Economic Issues and Migration. However, in light of events over the weekend, it may be that Leaders will also be required to discuss developments in the Middle East and the conflict which has now erupted between Israel and Hamas.

Along with my colleagues, I attended an informal pre-GAC breakfast on 19 September with Olha Stefanishyna, the Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration. It was a useful opportunity to reaffirm Ireland's and the EU's continued full support for Ukraine and its people, in the face of Russia's continued unjustified aggression.

Our full support for Ukraine includes continued financial support. Ireland is happy to support the provision of additional funding for Ukraine through the mid-term review of the MFF and the introduction of a 'Ukraine Facility' comprising 50% of the total additional expenditure proposed.

Our general position on the MFF review is that all existing flexibilities within the current 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework should be fully exhausted before any new funding, besides that proposed for Ukraine, is provided or there is any major rearrangement of the MFF which was a delicately balanced agreement.

Migration continues to be a major priority for the EU, as was evident from the discussion which took place at the Informal European Council in Granada last week. While it was unfortunate that all Leaders could not agree on specific language on migration, this should not mask the fact that there has been some significant progress in recent weeks through the agreement reached last week within Council on the general approach to govern the Crisis and Force Majeure Regulation, the final remaining legislative element of the Migration and Asylum Pact to be agreed by the Council.

This was a very welcome development and one which has improved the prospects for overall agreement on the Migration and Asylum Pact being achieved before the end of current legislative period next April. The need for such a comprehensive approach as the Pact offers for addressing the myriad of complex issues arising in relation to migration becomes clearer with every passing day.

In addition to discussing the draft annotated agenda for this month's European Council, the GAC also examined a proposal tabled by Spain to include Catalan, Basque and Galician as official languages of the EU. There was a large measure of support for the proposal from Member States, including Ireland, given the importance placed both on multilingualism and encouraging the greatest

possible access by all EU citizens to the EU and its Institutions. However, we also joined the many other Member States who sought additional information on any potential legal, political or administrative implications and it was ultimately agreed to refer the proposal to the Committee of Permanent Representatives to review the proposal in more detail.

Other items discussed at the 19 September Council included the Commission's legislative programming for the coming year with Member States broadly welcoming the emphasis placed on improving the EU's competitiveness, continued support for Ukraine and the green transition.

Ministers also held the Council's annual rule of law dialogue as well as addressing an ongoing evaluation of the dialogue which is currently underway. Ireland remains strongly supportive of the dialogue and of the annual rule of law reviews undertaken by the Commission as very important instruments in efforts to ensure Member States adhere to their obligations in this area.

I look forward to discussing the most recent rule of law review of Ireland at this month's General Affairs Council in Luxembourg and responding to comments and questions posed by Partners.

A major focus of discussion at the GAC was the issue of Enlargement and how the EU should begin to prepare for expanding to a possible Union of 35-37 Member States. Over lunch at the GAC, Ministers heard from two members of an independent Franco-German expert group which has recently produced a report and recommendations on the issue of EU Institutional Reform.

This discussion then continued at the Informal General Affairs Council which I attended in Murcia on 27-28 September where the issue of Enlargement and the Future of Europe was essentially the only item discussed. Committee Members will appreciate that an active discussion is now underway at EU level on this issue, with it also having figured significantly in Leaders' discussion at last week's Informal European Council in Granada.

Ireland very much welcomes and appreciates the need to start discussing the implications of Enlargement, and the necessary reforms which may accompany an expanded union. There will clearly be a major impact on the EU Budget and on policies such as CAP and cohesion. We will also need to look at areas such as our current decision-making capacity and how to maintain the effectiveness of the EU's standing in the international arena.

Nor, in this emerging debate, should we forget the manifold benefits of Enlargement or its strategic and geopolitical importance. Discussions of our absorption capacity and changes that may prove necessary should not delay or impede Enlargement.

In relation to the Franco-German report, it offers a very detailed analysis and some quite radical suggestions as to how the EU might be reformed in advance of the next phase of Enlargement. The report does, however, put a very welcome emphasis on the primacy of the rule of law as a fundamental principle for all members and prospective members of the EU.

Two final notes in relation to last month's regular General Affairs Council. I had a useful bilateral discussion with my Swedish counterpart, Jessika Roswall, *en*

marge of the Council to discuss the MFF review while under any other business, Ministers expressed strong solidarity with both Slovenia and Greece following extreme weather events over the summer in both countries due to heavy flooding in the case of Slovenia and wildfires and natural disasters in Greece.

Thank you Chair and Members, I am now obviously happy to take any questions you may have.