

European Parliament, Daily Notebook: CFSP (4 May 1999)

Caption: European Parliament debate, led by Mr Thomas Spencer MEP, on the role of the Union in the world and the implementation of the common foreign and security policy.

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A common foreign policy and an EU strategy towards Russia

(A4-0242/99 / A4-0219/99 / Spencer)

Tuesday 4 May — In a wide-ranging speech, Tom Spencer (Surrey, EPP) outlined challenges facing the EU, post-Amsterdam and, in particular, establishing a firm role on the world's stage. As he put it, the establishment of the euro had now led to expectations of similar political unity in the foreign policy field. At last the appointment of the High Representative responsible for foreign policy would bring clear visibility and answer Dr Kissinger's famous remark "who should I call for a European view". It should, he emphasised, bring about clarity and cohesion in the foreign policy decision-making area and further the process which in the past had been characterised by "imperfect institutions" trying to grapple with an insecure world. The challenge now was for Europe to find a common voice to deal with foreign policy issues whether it be in Iran, Iraq or India. Support for human rights and human dignity was vital, he said, and that was why Europe must remain firm in tackling the evil of ethnic cleansing.

He then drew attention to the importance of developing close links with Russia and emphasised under the spirit of Amsterdam the importance of Council taking account of Parliament's views before formulating a strategy. As he put it, for too long such decision-making has been left in the hands of diplomats representing national interests. Furthermore, he continued, the challenge of developing a coherent strategy towards the rest of the world would be severely tested in the Balkans over the next 5 years when the EU's credibility would be at stake. It was important, he felt, for the policy in the region to be seen in the context of enlargement. Continuing in this vein, he singled out cities such as Sofia, Skopje, Sarejevo and Belgrade as essential parts of European culture that shared the same civilisation. Indeed he recalled that Constantinople was once the centre of a thriving European culture and looked to the forthcoming meeting of representatives of 5 different religions as a means of securing peace in the region.

It was then the turn of Council President in Office Joschka Fischer to underline the importance he attached to the Amsterdam Treaty as a means of strengthening European foreign policy through a more coordinated approach and indeed a new representative who could bring a strong presence in this area. While it was vital to strengthen links with Russia if peace and stability in Kosovo was to be secured, Mr Fischer also underlined the importance of closer links with Israel and the Middle East and also the USA with a view to settling the problems over beef hormones and bananas. In addition, the June Cologne Summit would be used as a venue to explore ways of strengthening links between the EU and NATO. In particular, this should lead to means of developing common peacekeeping actions. He too underlined the importance of human rights, not only in the applicant states from Eastern Europe but also in China where, he said, the ill treatment of dissidents and minorities had been strongly condemned. Nevertheless, there was, he said, a need to go further and ensure that the EU was represented in vital foreign policy-making organisations such as the UN and the G8.

Gary Titley (Greater Manchester West, PES) said that the crisis in Kosovo showed up the weaknesses in the EU's defence policy and he considered that in the past the EU had been guilty of complacency. He underlined the need to ensure that the choice of the High Representative should not be a "fudge"; the individual appointed had to be someone who could really do the job. Mr Titley wanted Council to listen more to Parliament, but Parliament equally should not ask for unrealistic things. "There must be no morality without practicality", he said. He went on to call for more EU coordination in defence procurement. Although EU defence expenditure was two thirds that of the US, the impact was far less, he noted.

Many speakers such as Giorgos Dimitrakopoulos (Gr, EPP) called for a stronger CFSP. Jan Bertens (NL, ELDR) hoped that the Amsterdam Treaty would breathe life into the EU's defence policy and welcomed the fact that common strategies were a step towards majority decision-making in this field. However, he stressed, these policies must have democratic legitimacy. He wanted the High Representative to appear before the Foreign Affairs Committee and concluded by lamenting the fact that the Kosovo crisis showed that EU crisis management was sadly lacking. Olivier Dupuis (I, ERA) called for a European peacekeeping and peacemaking corps and for a "communitarisation" of EU foreign policy. Peter Truscott (Hertfordshire,

PES) called for a strengthening of the CFSP to give it real substance.

On the EU's relationship with Russia, Esko Seppänen (Fin, EUL/NGL) wondered whether the EU should be sending aid to Moscow as it appeared to cause more disruption in that country. Elisabeth Schroedter (D, Greens) warned that any bombing attack on Kosovo made relations with Russia more difficult. The EU needed to play a more major role in this area, she said. Otto von Habsburg (D, EPP) argued that relations with Russia should not be determined by fear but by the facts, and Russia was the last imperialist power in the world. Mr Truscott argued that it was the EU's duty to work with Russia to help it overcome its problems, but Moscow must do more itself to help its dire situation. Political will was necessary to defeat "robber baron capitalism".

Concluding, Acting Commissioner Hans van den Broek welcomed Mr Spencer's report. There was a danger, he said, of merely talking about the shortcomings of the CFSP but there were also "bright spots" where progress had been made. The West had not delayed over the situation in Kosovo as it had over the crisis in Bosnia where 200,000 had died. He believed that the Kosovo crisis had given the Member States the impetus to work together. He hoped that the common strategy towards Russia would be agreed at the Cologne summit. He echoed a number of speakers by stating that the Amsterdam Treaty offered the prospect of a more integrated approach.

Vote 12 noon tomorrow.