

A Europe worth fighting for

Marietje Schaake talks to the *Parliament Magazine* about the conflict in Syria, solutions to the refugee crisis, safe harbour and why she is in favour of TTIP

It has been a tough year for the EU. The Greek crisis, swiftly followed by an unprecedented humanitarian emergency, has tested Europe's institutions to their limits. Millions of refugees have fled the Middle East and north Africa to an unprepared EU, leading to the partial suspension of Schengen – a cornerstone of the EU. Strategic alliances are now the order of the day, with the EU having to work closely with Russia, Turkey and Saudi Arabia – all countries with questionable human rights records. Meanwhile, negotiations on the EU's landmark trade deal with the US (TTIP) are stalled and the European Court of Justice's latest ruling on EU-US data sharing is highlighting marked difference in attitudes between the EU and the US.

Taking a leading role in helping Parliament to resolve these issues is Europe's most "wired" politician, Dutch liberal MEP Marietje Schaake of Parliament's ALDE group. She is a Vice-Chair of the EU-US delegation, a member of Parliament's international trade committee (INTA) and a leading voice on foreign affairs and human rights. For Eurosceptics that argue EU officials don't work hard enough, they clearly haven't met Schaake.

Schaake attributes her motivation for being involved in such a breadth of areas to the "need for a stronger Europe in a changing world." Rapid globalisation, our increasing interconnectedness and the growing impact of events occurring outside the EU on the lives of citizens – best demonstrated by the refugee crisis – all present challenges that Schaake believes individual states cannot tackle individually. Underpinning this belief is her unwavering commitment to human rights, something she brought from her previous private sector work running a business consultancy focusing on civil rights aspects in the US-EU relationship. However, she is no blind idealist. The importance of balancing pragmatism and principle is something that runs clearly through her politics.

We begin with the issue of civil rights. Schaake is an outspoken critic of the Saudi and Bahraini regimes, both countries with which the EU enjoys close diplomatic and trade links. She recently nominated the imprisoned Saudi blogger Raif Badawi for the Parliament's Sakharov Prize – an award given to individuals who have made an exceptional contribution to the fight for human rights across the globe.

On the topic of the EU negotiating a trade deal with the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, ➔

"We need stronger EU weapon export controls particularly when it comes to those countries with a track record of violating human rights"

Photography by Bram Belloni





Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) she had this to offer; “to work on a rules-based trade system makes a lot of sense, but we should be very aware of other areas of concern including those of human rights.” However, she also believes that in the Gulf, “economic development must go hand in hand with improving the quality of life of citizens including those of migrant workers and women... with very fundamental freedoms under threat.”

The credibility of the EU in the foreign policy arena is an area where Schaake feels particularly strongly. She emphasises how the EU must tread a fine line between boosting EU trade and propping up autocratic regimes through the export of weapons and technology that can be used to suppress citizens’ fundamental rights. This is especially pertinent when discussing Saudi Arabia, a country to which the EU exported over €3bn worth of weapons last year. She has called for “stronger EU weapon export controls, particularly when it comes to

those countries with a track record of violating human rights.”

Turkey-EU relations are another area where Schaake’s commitment to promoting human rights is pitched against her need to find workable solutions. However, this time it’s not trade issues but the refugee crisis. She believes resolving the refugee crisis should not lead to the EU ignoring the “systematic decrease in the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary and the respect for rights and freedoms in Turkey.” On this, Schaake is critical of EU leaders, including Donald Tusk, President of the EU Council and Jean-Claude Juncker, EU Commission President, saying their approach “lacks maturity” and that “all the attention is on the refugee crisis when there are other areas which are equally important to address.”

Schaake strongly condemns Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s regime though she is aware of its strategic importance in combating ISIS, for trade relations in the Middle East and in stemming the flow of refugees coming into Europe. Turkey is currently hosting over 1.5 million refugees and the number is likely to rise the longer the conflict in the Middle East continues. Schaake argues, “We need Turkey as an ally against ISIS and we think Turkey is a vital country for trade relations.” She

identified the upcoming Turkish elections on 1 November as being “of crucial importance for Europeans and for our ability to work with a government that enjoys the respect and legitimacy of its own people.” However, it is “too early to tell” whether this is achievable in a country that has had “problems with media freedom and the use of political positions as a campaign platform.”

As the conflict in Syria deepens, with Russia now actively involved in military attacks on both ISIS and more moderate opponents of Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, the need to find a solution and prevent the death toll rising further has never been more pressing. Schaake is highly critical of the EU’s handling of the situation, “it is appalling to see how little the EU has done to end the war in Syria.”

However, in contrast with many other politicians that preach but don’t practice, she offers practical solutions to ending the conflict. She highlights the need for the EU to establish a

common position and then to work with all countries involved towards a peaceful solution. In terms of what an EU common position would entail, Schaake says it would have to be “a comprehensive one, taking into account the humanitarian situation.” Specifically, she would like to see the EU helping to develop and build on local ceasefires, introducing no-fly zones in certain areas and putting major pressure on Russia. She also believes the EU needs to work with Iran and “bring (to the table) Turkey and Saudi Arabia, as they are – unfortunately – also involved in the situation.” The MEP also wants moderate opponents of Assad to “come forward with serious plans” as “there must be a viable alternative to the current regime.”

She believes that any solution to the conflict that involves him will be unpalatable. She describes him as having lost all legitimacy, having killed civilians “without any hesitation.” She cannot envisage any future where he plays a key role. Opinions in Europe on the role Assad should play in defeating ISIS are divided, though he is increasingly likely to have a transitional role in any solution. This is evidence of a perceptible shift in attitudes towards Assad as outright enemy to an (almost) ally, with identifying a solution to the conflict the main priority. Schaake emphasised this, saying, “ending the bloodshed should be a key priority.” On Assad she added that “maybe there can be room for exceptional measures.” However, she insists that Europe’s main priority “should be to hold all those who have perpetrated violence to account.”

Schaake is one of Parliament’s most vocal supporters of the controversial trans-Atlantic trade and investment partnership (TTIP). The trade deal, which would be the largest in history, has been strongly opposed in some quarters, with a recent petition attracting over three million signatures. Opposition has largely focused on the lack of transparency in the ongoing negotiations and the so-called ‘investor state dispute system’ (ISDS) – something that the Commission has recently announced it will replace with the new investment court system. While Schaake is in favour of the trade deal she is keenly aware of the need to listen to criticisms from stakeholders. She says she has “consistently pushed for more transparency,” to reflect the “expectations and requests for more information from society,” and that we need to continue pushing for more transparency above and beyond the initiatives taken by the Commission.

Schaake is supportive of the investment court system, describing the new investment protection system as “dramatically reformed.” However, this is not an opinion shared by all. Critics of the system maintain that changes have been cos-

metic, with the flaws remaining intact. According to sceptics, individuals will still unfairly shoulder foreign investor risk and lawmakers will be deterred by the mechanism from regulating in the public interest. These accusations are something the MEP strongly rebuts; “it cannot be underestimated how different this system is to the old mechanism.” She cites a larger, more permanently available pool of judges – as oppose to private arbitrators – as well as a more open and transparent system as proof of this.

Her motivation for supporting TTIP centres on her belief that cooperation between the EU and the US – places she knows well, having lived in both – can “take a lead in setting standards by not only framing trade in a rules-based system but also by ensuring that people and the planet are duly considered.” She argues that the substance is more important than the speed at which negotiations are concluded with “the end goal being a good agreement that benefits EU citizens and can be seen as a win-win for the EU and the US.”

“The EU needs a common position first and foremost. It is appalling to see how little the EU has done to end the war in Syria and in the vacuum that has emerged because of a lack of EU or US leadership we see countries such as Russia, Saudi Arabia and Iran stepping forward”

The EU-US safe harbour agreement is an area of trans-Atlantic cooperation Schaake is less keen on, with digital freedom an area where she is really enthusiastic. The agreement was declared invalid last week by the European Court of Justice on the grounds that EU governments should retain the right to prevent the US accessing EU citizens’ data. The case was brought against Facebook by a privacy activist, following allegations that US security services had been spying on EU internet users. She welcomed the suspension of safe harbour, saying that she hopes that renegotiations of the agreement will provide

better protection for individuals. Schaake is one of few MEPs who has understood and embraced the increasing impact of the internet on our lives and the need to update regulations drawn up in a pre-internet world. On this she believes, “there is a great opportunity for the EU to take leadership and protect the digital freedoms of people worldwide.”

With Euroscepticism on the rise, many seem to be questioning their faith in the EU project. However, Schaake remains resolute in her defence of the Union, saying, “I have been disappointed a lot in the past six years, but I also believe that without the EU we would invent it today. In this changing world we need to work together as EU countries. We all believe we are great powers but we are relatively small on a global scale. When we work together we can be the strongest economy and the strongest political bloc... I absolutely believe it is worth fighting for a better functioning, more democratic EU.” ★