

STATEMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION
BY COUNSELLOR GEORGE GEORGIU
DEPUTY PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF CYPRUS TO THE OPCW
AT THE 111th SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL
(The Hague, 10 - 13 March 2026)
Agenda item 5: General debate

Mr. Chairperson,

Director-General,

Distinguished delegates,

I have the honour of speaking on behalf of the European Union (EU).

I would like to begin by recalling that the EU follows developments in Iran and the Middle East with utmost concern. In this context, let me also recall the statement delivered by High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas on behalf of the EU on first of March 2026, which outlines the EU's position on the developments. The statement is attached to this EU general debate statement and available on Catalyst.

I will now proceed to deliver the EU statement for the EC-111 general debate to which the following countries align themselves:

Andorra, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Republic of Moldova, San Marino and Ukraine.

The European Union commends the Chairperson, H.E. Ambassador Thomas Schieb of Germany, for his wise and successful stewardship and assure him of our full support in steering the work of the 111th Session of the Executive Council. The EU also wishes to express its full confidence in the Secretariat and commends the effective leadership of OPCW Director-General, Ambassador Fernando Arias. We welcome the confirmations that the Secretariat is monitoring all relevant situations and any allegations of use of chemical weapons that could arise, and stands ready to assist, if requested, in accordance with the Convention.

Mr. Chairperson,

24th of February this year marked a stark anniversary: Russia's unjustified and illegal full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine has continued for four years, inflicting a devastating toll on the country and its people. We reaffirm our unwavering commitment and support - with all available means at our disposal - for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders and its inherent right of self-defence.

The ramifications of the Russian aggression are felt across the globe, resulting in the deterioration of the security environment, and putting profound pressure on the global disarmament architecture including through the re-emergence of the use of chemical weapons. The EU is seriously concerned by the ever-growing number of registered cases of the use of Riot Control Agents (RCA) by Russia as a method of warfare, which is explicitly prohibited by the Convention, as well as by credible reports of the use of choking agent chloropicrin against Ukrainian soldiers.

Three OPCW Technical Assistance Visit (TAV) reports have confirmed the presence of riot control agents in samples collected from the frontlines in Ukraine. These reports and the increasing number of cases registered by the Ukrainian authorities point to a pattern of systematic riot control agent use by Russia as a method of warfare. Russia still has not provided a credible explanation pursuant to Article IX of the Convention. Instead, it continues to deflect its responsibilities and cynically distort facts with disinformation campaigns.

In light of the seriousness of the situation, the EU reiterates its call for a timely attribution of responsibility for these proven breaches of the Convention. It is our common responsibility to act without delay against violations of the Convention, and to ensure that perpetrators of any confirmed chemical attacks are identified and held to account. Continued non-compliance is a grave threat to the purpose and object of the Convention.

Russia – a permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council – has a track-record of breaching the CWC. In 2018, Russian military intelligence service agents used Novichok in Salisbury, the United Kingdom, resulting in the tragic death of Dawn Sturgess.

In August 2020, Russian operatives attempted to poison Alexey Navalny with Novichok. Furthermore, we have taken note with concern of the recent conclusion of the Governments of the UK, Sweden, France, Germany and the Netherlands that poisoning was highly likely the cause of Mr. Navalny's sudden death on 16 February 2024 in a Russian penal colony. The EU continues to call on Russia to allow independent and transparent international investigations into these clear breaches of the Convention.

Mr. Chairperson,

The EU commends the continued constructive engagement and sustained efforts between the Secretariat and the Syrian transitional authorities with a view to dismantling the Assad-era secret chemical weapons programme. We however note with concern the handling of seventy-five (75) cylinders of Category 3 chemical weapons in the Aleppo region. The EU has taken note of the measures taken by the Syrian Arab Republic in response and encourages the Syrian National Authority to complete its inquiries into the matter as soon as possible and share the results with the Secretariat and the States Parties.

The EU strongly condemns the use of chemical weapons by anyone – be it a State or a non-State actor – anywhere, at any time and under any circumstances. It is a violation of international law and can amount to the most serious of international crimes - war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The fifth OPCW Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) report issued on 21 January 2026 found the Syrian Arab Air Force responsible for a chemical weapons attack in Kafr Zeita, in the Syrian Arab Republic on 1 October 2016. The report concludes that there are reasonable grounds to believe that a military helicopter released a cylinder which contained chlorine gas, injuring 35 named individuals and affecting dozens more.

The OPCW Investigation and Identification Team's professional reporting is an important contribution to efforts to end impunity for the use of chemical weapons. The EU recognises the positive role of the Syrian Transitional Authorities in facilitating OPCW investigations.

Mr. Chairperson,

The international non-proliferation and disarmament architecture - including the global norm against the use of chemical weapons – is under profound stress. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that the Secretariat remains fit for purpose and able to fulfil its tasks responding to any contingency.

In this context, we commend efforts, and emphasise the need for further progress, towards gender equality in the Organisation and for a more geographically diverse and representative Secretariat, while securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity, and look forward to further progress in enhancing gender mainstreaming and the sharing of the results with States Parties.

In concluding, I am pleased to recall the EU's substantial voluntary financial contributions in support of the OPCW's activities in Syria and Ukraine, its capacity building efforts as well as for embracing opportunities and mitigating risks arising from the emerging technologies.

1 March 2026

Statement by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on developments in the Middle East

The European Union follows developments in Iran and the Middle East with utmost concern. The European Union has adopted extensive sanctions in response to the actions of Iranian authorities, whether their brutal repression and human rights violations against the Iranian people or threats to the region and to European and international security, through Iran's ballistic missile and nuclear programmes, and its support for armed groups in the Middle East. We will continue to protect EU security and interests, including through additional sanctions. The European Union has consistently urged Iran to end Iran's nuclear programme, curb its ballistic missile programme, refrain from destabilizing activities in the region and in Europe, and to cease the appalling violence and repression against its own people.

We call for maximum restraint, protection of civilians and full respect of international law, including the principles of the United Nations Charter, and international humanitarian law. The Middle East stands to lose greatly from any drawn-out war. Iran's attacks and violation of sovereignty of a number of countries in the region are inexcusable. Iran must refrain from indiscriminate military strikes. We express our solidarity with partners in the region that have been attacked or affected. We reiterate our commitment to regional stability and to the protection of civilian life.

We remain in close contact with partners in the region to contribute to de-escalation and reaffirm the steadfast commitment of the European Union and its member states to safeguarding regional security and stability. The European Union will continue to contribute to all diplomatic efforts to reduce tensions and to bring about a lasting solution to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. Full cooperation by Iran with the International Atomic Energy Agency as well as adherence to Iran's legal obligations under Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement are crucial, and nuclear safety is a critical priority. Preservation of maritime security and respect of freedom of navigation are also of utmost importance.

The EU and its member states are taking all necessary steps to ensure the safety of EU citizens in the region, including by activating the EU Civil Protection Mechanism if necessary.

The events unfolding in Iran must not lead to an escalation that could threaten the Middle East, Europe and beyond, with unpredictable consequences, also in the economic sphere. The disruption of critical waterways, like the Strait of Hormuz, must be avoided.

The EU reiterates its solidarity with the Iranian people and strongly supports their fundamental aspirations for a future where their universal human rights and fundamental freedoms are fully respected. +++