



Transcript of the Debate on the Situation and Cultural Heritage in Kashgar (Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China)

*European Parliament, Strasbourg
10 March 2011*

On 10 March 2011 the European Parliament adopted a joint resolution (P7_TA(2011)0100) on the Situation and Cultural Heritage in Kashgar (Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China). The adoption of the resolution followed a conference convened by Frieda Brepoels MEP on 27 January 2011 with support from the Belgian Uyghur Association and the UNPO in which MEPs from across the political spectrum pledged their support to an urgency resolution.

Led by Frieda Brepoels MEP, Niccolò Rinaldi MEP, Kinga Gál MEP, Edward McMillan-Scott MEP, and Helga Trüpel MEP, deputies from different member states and political groups came together to adopt a common position on the need to safeguard the city of Kashgar and to express support for a Han-Uyghur dialogue that could begin to address the marginalisation, discrimination and repression that has been meted out to the Uyghur community in China since the 1940s.

The resolution, which was adopted by forty-six votes to one, with five abstentions was the product of collaboration between all the political groups within the European Parliament. Following its adoption, the resolution was communicated to the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, EU Member States, Secretary-General of the United Nations, United Nations Human Rights Council, UNESCO, National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China and the XUAR Regional Party Standing Committee.

This transcript details the speeches made by Members of the European Parliament during the debate that preceded the vote on the adoption of the resolution.

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Tunne Kelam MEP

Uyghurs have practically become a minority in their historic homeland. They need international support to preserve their culture and identity. In fact, the fate of the ancient city of Kashgar has been put at stake. The modernisation programme targets up to eighty-five percent of traditional old Kashgar [which] is to be demolished. It is important to prevent the historic quarters to be replaced by modern apartment blocks. If the Chinese authorities are serious to convince us that all will be okay, they have first of all to convince the native population of East Turkestan that their cultural heritage will be really respected and that the Uyghur language will be taught in schools at equal level with Chinese language. I call on the Chinese authorities to accept possible contributions by ICOMOS which has impressive experience on the management of urban historic landscapes; and I ask the Chinese government to agree to linking Kashgar to UNESCO world heritage standards that will include several cultural sites along the ancient Silk Road.

Marietje Schaake MEP



Under the title of 'reform and development' the ancient Silk Road city of Kashgar is being demolished. It is not only a blow to global cultural heritage but most of all this property is very important for the Uyghur and Hui populations and for China's cultural diversity as a whole which is now being destroyed. China has stepped up efforts to boost relations through cultural diplomacy throughout the world. But no one will be interested in a marketed, homogenised, culture of a country which has such cultural diversity. Also for economic opportunity and sustainable relations with the rest of the world, respect for human rights and minorities in the broadest sense is essential. We urge the Chinese government to assess the possibility of including Kashgar in the joint application with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan for the Silk Road UNESCO world heritage designation and the High Representative should step up the human rights dialogue with China and make it more action-oriented and effective.

Lidia Joanna Geringer de Oedenberg MEP



Our debate today on the minorities in China happened a day after the recent decision of the Dalai Lama when he no longer is going to be the Tibetan leader. I think we need to observe the situation in Tibet in the coming weeks and months but today we speak about another discriminated minority, the Uyghurs, a Muslim minority. China often says that it fights terrorism and unfortunately in this case at the same time destroys the historical heritage. We are especially worried about the changes in the city of Kashgar that destroys the Old Town, one of the most interesting and best preserved examples of architecture – Muslim architecture – in Central Asia. More than a million tourist come every year to the city and the city should perhaps be on the world heritage UNESCO list if only China wanted it to happen. Hopefully the European Union is going to act efficiently, speaking to Chinese authorities, reminding them of the need to respect minorities and protect cultural heritage.

Frieda Brepoels MEP



It is clear that Kashgar is the symbol *par excellence* of the Uyghur cultural identity in East Turkestan which is in China. On January 27 [2011] I organised a conference in Brussels and there I was able to see the impact this Chinese destructive urbanisation is having on the Uyghur people. Their excuse is public security but no more than fifteen percent of the original city is going to be left and the rest is going to be turned into an open-air museum. I think it is very high time we reacted and powerfully before it is too late. This parliament criticises the Chinese government for violently stopping protests in Urumqi [East Turkestan] a couple of years ago and we called upon them to enter into a respectful dialogue with the Uyghurs and a more integrated and comprehensive economic policy in the area to promote the local people and to protect their cultural identity. But sadly, today's Chinese policy in Kashgar is the exact opposite. They are destroying Kashgar without giving the local people any say at all in what they are doing and also their unwillingness to let Kashgar apply for UNESCO world heritage status is typical of the way the Chinese Communist Party deals with cultural diversity.

Charles Tannock MEP



The EU's motto is 'Unity in Diversity'; sadly such a sentiment does not resonate in the People's Republic of China whose Communist rulers are obsessed with unity but not much thought is given to celebrating diversity. Undoubtedly the attempt to impose Han Chinese majority culture on tiny minorities in the world's most populous country is causing much tension and resentment. We already know about the suppression of the ancient Buddhist Tibetan culture over the last sixty years now we see the same threat looming over the city of Kashgar in the restive province of Xinjiang. For two thousand years Kashgar has been a thriving city on the Silk Road with a rich, unique, Central Asian and flourishing culture and now it is facing wholesale demolition and rebuilding. It is hard to escape the idea this is Beijing's attempt to break the will of the Uyghur separatists. Now, I personally have no brief or sympathy for the separatist cause, some of whom I am afraid have links to Al-Qaida. But I urge the Chinese government to think again. The destruction of an ancient city like Kashgar would simply strengthen the resolve of all those that would wish to ferment violence against the state.

Rui Tavares MEP



To tell you the truth, of the three urgent debates that we are holding this afternoon, this is the one where we feel most powerless. We have been talking about Pakistan, we have talked about Belarus, and then we have reason to believe the European Union does not just have moral authority but it also has some leverage. It can try to bring pressure to bear so that the authorities in those countries will change matters but when we talk about China we know that this leverage is much less. Despite what we believe, it is much lower because of what Sarkozy does in his capital, what Mrs Merkel does in her capital, what my prime minister Mr. Sócrates does, but recently he actually rerouted a demonstration against the Chinese regime because there was a visit from the Chinese president to Lisbon. So [the] Chinese administration tries to make us believe in this illusion there are no demonstrations, there are no protests, there is no opposition in their country whether you are in Canton, or in Shanghai, or in Tibet or in Uyghur. there is peace everywhere, so it is very difficult for the Parliament to say what we are going to say today – what we have written in our motion for resolution – and then to believe that this demographic genocide against the Uyghur will be brought to an end by our motion for a resolution and that we want the Chinese authorities to preserve these sites and these artefacts which have huge cultural value. But our leaders, our heads of government are throwing themselves into the arms of the Chinese administration because of the trade opportunities there and at the end of the day we demonstrate our impotence here because our governments end up seeming to show just admiration for the Chinese administration. But I think we have got to change our attitudes to the Chinese government in our own member state governments.

Bernd Posselt MEP



The Uyghurs as has already been said are not a minority. They are a very ancient people living along the Silk Road with their own leadership. They have had a Uyghur World Congress [sic] and they are hoping to preserve the

cultural heritage of Kashgar through, among other things, an organisation which held a meeting recently in Strasbourg. So we need to send a friendly appeal to the Chinese. This is a cultural ethnocide or genocide that they are engaged in at the moment. What they should do is to recognise that this is one of the characteristics of a genuinely cultured people is that they protect the cultures of minorities in their midst. So the Chinese need to only use their own constitution, which in three of its articles states that cultural heritage must be preserved. It is quite clear - what we want from our Chinese partners is to see them come up with some way to meet our concerns and to protect the Uyghur and their heritage.

Corina Crețu MEP



Personally, I feel that we have to look at things from different points of view. We must make sure that we do not take partisan views. We should not just think of the Uyghurs or the Chinese. I think that what is happening in Xinjiang does show that there is violence and we have to promote inter-ethnic dialogue. The European Parliament's resolution should not talk about the rights of the Chinese authorities to defend the security of their country especially since there is the Islamic threat in the area. I think that we have to support democracy.

Kristiina Ojuland MEP



It is well known that Uyghuria [sic] is in imminent danger of becoming a second Tibet. The People's Republic of China has announced the Kashgar Dangerous House Reform, the purpose of which is to raze 85% of the Old City in Kashgar. Such philistinism must be stopped and the European Union must insist that the authorities of the People's Republic of China will not destroy this important cultural site and the ancient Silk Road. The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Persons belonging to the National or Ethnic, Religious or Linguistic minorities as well as the constitution of the [People's] Republic of China must be respected even by Beijing. The [People's] Republic of China is more and more exercising Sinization of the ethnic minorities such as Uyghurs and the Tibetans. It is a cultural genocide in the twenty-first century which we simply cannot accept.

Jaroslav Paška MEP



The official circles in China have been unhappy when other ancient and important cultures were even mentioned, especially the civilisations that left their historical and cultural landmarks in the territory of contemporary China. The city of Kashgar is the centre of Muslim Uyghurs and they represent one of the biggest national minorities of China. The Chinese have been trying to dominate the territory of Uyghurs for millennia but they were defeated many times. That is why the Chinese administration tries to suppress the slightest manifestations of cultural traditions or even the identity intertwined with the city of Kashgar and its rich cultural heritage. I am not sure if the official Chinese representatives are able to adopt a philosophy accepting traditions and history. After all, the contemporary state

of China is based not only in its own traditions of history but also in the traditional history of other nations. The Chinese approach to Tibet, to the Uyghur cultural heritage in Kashgar demonstrates that the Chinese administration cannot respect the assets brought into their own country by other nations and cultures. We have to send a clear message from this house that we, unlike the Chinese, do respect all the historical monuments of the territory of the [People's] Republic of China, including those in Tibet or ancient Kashgar.



Seán Kelly MEP

Kashgar is a city of three and a half million people – a little bit less than the population of the entire island of Ireland. It is closer to Baghdad than it is to Beijing. It is on the great trading route of the Silk Road and has some of the best preserved sites of Islamic architecture, some of them buried beneath the desert. It also has the largest mosque tomb in China and, of course is a treasure, without any doubt about it. However, as has been said it is under great threat. Ostensibly because the Chinese want to redevelop the city because of its susceptibility to earthquakes, and that is not of course acceptable to us because we feel that a great treasure would be lost. What can we do about it? Perhaps very little. But at least highlighting it here today is important. We can, as we said, ask people to include it in the world heritage site for the Silk Road and maybe also make people aware of the treasures there so people there can preserve it into the future. It will be the world's loss but it will be the loss to China.



Mitro Repo MEP

This resolution refers to this very important cultural tradition and heritage, and the cultural identity of the Uyghur people. This is one of the great Islamic cities of Central Asia that we are talking about. It has a history stretching back to the time of the Han Dynasty in China and it was a part of the Silk Road which united and joined Europe and Asia. So it has enormous cultural relevance to the entire world. We need to start actions that will help to preserve this city for future generations. There is also the question of the Uyghur cultural identity. Its destruction is part of a strategy by China and we need to earmark funds to be used to help to preserve this cultural identity.



Monica Luisa Macovei MEP

Future generations depend on our actions today to protect timeless sites such as Kashgar. Kashgar is a fundamental pillar to the history of Islam in China. In 2009 the Chinese government announced an urban reconstruction programme that plans to demolish eighty-five percent of the old city of Kashgar [and] to replace it with modern apartments. The demolition should be stopped. Urban planners should identify a development plan that preserves the old city of Kashgar. The whole Silk Road in China should be submitted for protection under UNESCO's world heritage programme which China joined in 1985. I call upon the Commission and the Council to raise these matters with the Chinese authorities.



Raül Romeva i Rueda MEP

Cultural heritage is crucial to preserve identity. This is clear in Europe, in China, and wherever; and the Chinese authorities know this. However we have seen for instance how they have destroyed, voluntarily, this heritage, which means this identity in several places like Tibet and now they are doing the same in the Uyghur places like Kashgar. This is why it is so important we once again explain our position with requests – we strongly ask – the Chinese government to immediately stop the cultural destruction threatening Kashgar’s architectural survival and to effectuate a comprehensive expert inquiry into culturally sensitive methods of renovation. This is not for nothing. The credibility of a government is also based on how they treat their minorities. If the Chinese want to be credible in the international sphere it is important that they treat properly and equally and according to human and respect standards of minorities such as Uyghurs.



Paul Rübiger MEP

I believe that culture allows one to assert one’s identity on the international stage and Carl Hassberg [sic] explained to us this week how important it is for the assertion of identity, that these cultures be preserved, not just for the Uyghurs but that their culture is available for the rest of the world as well. I think China ought to make some concessions here towards us. There is an agreement recently with Jinzu that direct dollar investments will be possible in Jinzu, so I see an opportunity that this region could be focused on more as well and in the various cities and regions in China we can ensure that all these citizen regions enjoy the same rights and I think international relations with these citizen regions could help an awful lot.



Sari Essayah MEP

The basic rights of minorities in China are not being respected, I refer to ethnic minorities of course. The Communist Party of China is denying the chance to Kashgar to take part in a competition to get UNESCO world heritage status. It is closing down cultural centres in Kashgar and it is not on the Chinese list of major cultural sites. In fact, what China is trying to do is the opposite, it is trying to tear down buildings, traditional buildings, in that city and to deny them to future generations. It is cruelly attacking the cultural heritage of the Uyghur people. So the reality that the Chinese are in denial about is that China is a multicultural society.



Elena Bănescu MEP

The historic centre of Kashgar is in danger and therefore the important reference point of the local population is in danger. What is being done is going to affect this population that is on the Silk Road. The fact that the Uyghurs are being driven from their homes flouts the rights of this minority. The city of

Kashgar is considered to be the best example of Islamic architecture in Central Asia. The houses and roads could be restored in order to improve the living conditions of the inhabitants. But the question is, why are the authorities not investing in these type of works? I recommend we include the historic centre of Kashgar in the UNESCO world heritage site list and I urge the Chinese authorities to put an end to the demolition of the city and to put forward alternatives.



Eija-Riitta Korhola MEP

Kashgar is way out in the west of China and the Kashgar people have been very successful in keeping their traditions alive there. It has become a major destination for tourists but the Chinese government seems determined to try and control everything that happens there. But the rights of the Kashgar people must be safeguarded despite all events there. So the safety [and] security [of] structures should be improved there, can be improved but without destroying swathes of the old city – that is not the way to do it. So they must put a stop to this destruction and they must preserve this wonderful cultural heritage.



Ryszard Czarnecki MEP

Yet again the European Parliament is speaking on the issue of the Uyghurs, the Muslim minority discriminated in China. Let me recall an EP [European Parliament] resolution to this effect. Let me also recall that we too should talk about this in the context of other minorities persecuted in communist China, such as Catholics. Catholics, or Christians in general, are strongly discriminated. The Chinese authorities have set up dedicated church structures which are not recognised by the Catholic Church. I think today's discussion has been very useful and it could be a voice in favour of all religious minorities in China.



Commissioner Johannes Hahn

The protection of the cultural patrimony is evidently of central importance to ensure the protection and continuation of a minorities traditions and way of life. Moreover the destruction of important cultural property has the potential to deal a serious blow, not only to the heritage and archaeology patrimony of the minority concerned but the cultural heritage in general. In this light, the European Union is following with concern the redevelopment of the ancient city of Kashgar in the Xinjiang [Uyghur] Autonomous Region of China. The significance of Kashgar as a centre of culture for the Uyghur minority in China cannot be overstated. Kashgar is conceived as important as Jerusalem is to Jews, Muslims and Christians. The Chinese government's 2009 White Paper on Xinjiang stated that restoration of Kashgar is necessary to protect the city from earthquakes or fires. While this is a laudable aim, civil society both in China and internationally has expressed considerable disquiet about the methods employed. There is serious concern that as much as eight-five percent of the old city may be demolished. Indeed, many notable buildings including the unique Xanliq madrassa appear already to have been destroyed. It is also worrying that some two hundred thousand persons may be displaced from their traditional homes and that there appears to have been



little or no consultation with the residents affected. It is feared that the demolition of structures which have formed the basis of Uyghur culture for many hundreds of years may have a grave impact on the preservation of the culture in the years ahead. It is also regrettable that China has chosen not to propose Kashgar as a world heritage site despite its unique status, as this would allow UNESCO to become involved in the process of redevelopment. We understand that UNESCO has in any event made representations to the Chinese authorities concerning the impact of the development on Kashgar's traditional heritage and culture. The European Union fully shares these concerns and will call on the Chinese authorities to work with UNESCO to ensure that any redevelopment of Kashgar meets international best practice in this field. The European Union will also call on the Chinese authorities to ensure that the inhabitants of Kashgar are fully consulted about the future of the city and that their views are taken into account.