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Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union
Policy Department for External Relations

Euronest Parliamentary Assembly - 4th Ordinary Session

Draft opening speech for Vice-President Ryszard Czarnecki

Yerevan - 17 March 2015

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Excellences, dear colleagues, dear friends, dear Heidi, dear Borys, Co-Chairs of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly,

I am honoured to address you today on behalf of Martin Schulz, the President of the European Parliament, on the occasion of the opening of the 4th Ordinary Session of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, the first one after the European elections in May 2014 and the first one hosted by Armenia. It is a significant event in our evolving partnership and I would like to thank our Armenian hosts for their hospitality and for the organisation of this fourth session.

Since our last plenary meeting in Brussels two years ago, many developments have occurred in the Eastern Partnership. Association Agreements between the European Union and three partners: Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have been signed, while other partners have chosen to develop their relations with the European Union in another framework or are still reflecting. The crisis in Ukraine which started right after the Vilnius Summit has led to major political changes in this country. The annexation of the Crimea by Russia and the armed conflict in the East of Ukraine have had heavy repercussions on the neighbourhood region and the whole of Europe and it will also have a significant impact on the revision of the European Neighbourhood Policy, a process which has been recently launched.

Over the last 12 months, in addition to the European elections, a number of parliamentary elections have been held in the region: in Ukraine in October 2014 and in Moldova in November 2014. I am pleased to warmly welcome those Members who are new to the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly. We look forward to working together to make this Assembly - and this fourth session in particular - a success.

Once again, we unfortunately meet in a format which does not include any Belarussian Members of Parliament. In fact, the September 2012 parliamentary elections in Belarus failed to meet international standards. I regret this situation and I hope that our Assembly will also include Belarussian Members in the near future once the conditions are met.

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends,

Beyond the many parliamentary elections that took place in the period between the plenary meetings, I would also like to highlight key reforms our partners have carried out over the past year in line with our mutual commitments.

In Ukraine, the new Verkhovna Rada approved the programme of the new government on 11 December 2014. This is a big achievement in itself having in mind the dramatic domestic circumstances. By this approval, in accordance with the Constitution, the parliament refrains from seeking the dismissal of the government for a period of one year. Most of the reforms foreseen in the government programme are to be implemented within two years.

Since the Ukrainian government committed itself to the path of European integration, the reforms will to be implemented according to the roadmap set by the Association Agreement/DCFTA. The EU is committed to providing support for this reform process. Key areas concern foreign and domestic policies priorities: reform of budget and tax codes, reform of public service including the police and the judiciary and opening up the Ukrainian economy including land market.

A successful reform process and sustainable prosperity are only possible if peace prevails. The recently signed Minsk Package of Measures gives a glimpse of hope for a solution to the conflict. While the situation is far from normalised, the current implementation of the ceasefire, a first exchange of prisoners and declarations on withdrawal of heavy weapons from the front line, bring concrete reasons to believe in the peaceful settlement of this conflict. If the truce is not fully respected, the European Union is nonetheless determined to increase the pressure on Russia with further economic sanctions.

In Moldova the implementation of reforms and commitments assumed in the Association Agreement are regaining momentum after the parliamentary elections and the process of forming of the new government. On a positive note, Moldova completed last year its Visa Liberalisation Action Plan and was granted a visa free regime with the EU. More than 300 000 Moldovans have already benefited from this new regime.

A number of important steps were also taken to reform the justice sector. They included the drafting and adoption of bills, the appointment and selection of judges, the training of prosecutors, judges and other persons in the legal system. As regards the basic human rights, we hope that the Moldovan Parliament will adopt soon the bill to institute a gender representation quota in the political sphere as well as to ensure women's active participation in decision-making.

On Georgia, we are pleased to note that it acted on most of the key recommendations in last year's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) progress report. It organised presidential elections in line with international standards. It continued to reform the justice system and advanced in sectorial reforms and regulatory approximation to the EU acquis. It actively participated in the Geneva discussions concerning the breakaway territories and took measures to improve the living conditions of internally displaced persons (IDPs), with the support of the EU; it also renewed its commitment to a genuine engagement with the breakaway regions.

Armenia decided in September 2013 not to sign an Association Agreement with the EU. We respect Armenia's decision, and another institutional framework for a dialogue within the Eastern Partnership will have to be defined. In fact, Armenia continued to be committed on the path of reforms, and addressed some of the key recommendations contained in last year's ENP progress report. We welcome the adoption of a law on equal rights and opportunities for men and women which, however, lacks a mechanism for complaints. There were limited developments regarding reforms in the public administration and in the judiciary. Nevertheless, preparatory work was undertaken to proceed with reforms about the electoral legislation, fight against corruption and Human Rights protection.

We regret that members of the Milli Mejlis of Azerbaijan are not today with us; we still believe that the country has its full place in our Eastern Partnership and in the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly. While it is true that differentiation has always been a key feature of this Partnership, and that its importance will only increase, this can, and should, not happen at the expense of inclusiveness. As to the EU's relations with Azerbaijan, we know that a draft text on a new legally binding agreement based on our common European values is being negotiated.

Belarus is the only Eastern Partnership country not participating in the parliamentary dimension; however it is actively participating in the multilateral track of the Eastern Partnership. The EU is actively discussing modernisation issues and reforms with the Belarusian

civil society, and negotiations on visa liberalisation and readmission agreement is developing well between the EU and Belarus authorities, with the hope to initial a visa facilitation agreement by the Eastern Partnership Summit to be held in Riga in May 2015. The engagement Belarus has shown in its efforts to offer a platform for a peaceful resolution of the Ukrainian crisis has been well noted and appreciated.

On 15 November 2015 Belarus will hold the Presidential elections, which we hope will be free and fair with the opposition representatives having a fair chance to participate. For the time being, the EUs critical engagement policy remains valid and it is conditional to the release and rehabilitation of political prisoners, to actual free and fair elections (according to OSCE standards), to a functioning rule of law and effective respect for human rights.

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear colleagues,

This session is particularly important and timely as it is held two months before the Riga Summit. The reports presented by the Committees of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly which will be submitted to the Assembly for adoption will be the message from Parliaments to the heads of state and government gathering in Riga in May. In this context, I would like to underline it is not in the mandate of this forum to solve bilateral differences. As we did during the third session in Brussels in 2013, we must focus our attention on the general and horizontal issues at stake within the Eastern Partnership, on all the values and aspirations which unite us, on the inclusive spirit which animates the this Assembly, rather than on divisive elements. I am convinced that this way we will be in a position to send a strong message to the Summit from the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, on behalf of the citizens we represent addressing the priorities of our societies and our partnership.

I look forward to fruitful discussions leading to a deeper understanding among us.

Thank you and the best of success to your work.