

Committee on Constitutional Affairs, 22.01.2018

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Honorable Madame Chair,

Honorable Members of the European Parliament,

- It is a great honour and privilege for me to present to you the priorities of the first Bulgarian Presidency of the Council.
- I deeply believe that **there is strong symbolism in the fact that 11 years after joining the European Union**, Bulgaria is now undertaking the demanding task of the Rotating Presidency, involving a high level of responsibility.
- Today's discussion is a good example of the key principle of continuity in the work of the European Union institutions. As my colleague Matti Maasikas presented, the Estonian Presidency was one of "**Unity through Balance**". The motto of the Bulgarian Presidency, chosen with strong citizen support, is "**United We Stand Strong**" ("L'union fait la force"). It is a kind of reflection of our history and statehood, a key message, written on the House of our National Parliament.
- I am sure we all share the view that today is a decisive moment for the European project to be reformed. Europe and Europeans expect the Union to provide **tangible solutions for security, stability, solidarity, competitiveness and cohesion**.

Quite often we take those principles and values for granted or we perceive them as abstract notions. But actually they are like **oxygen** for Europeans – we only notice their absence when we lose them.

- We very much believe that we will conduct an **open-to-citizens Presidency**. To achieve this, I would like to assure all of you that we will strongly rely on the open and cooperative relations with the European Parliament and all its committees.
- In a more personal manner, let me share with you my particular emotion and pleasure to be again in this House! As a former MEP I am convinced that the role of the European Parliament **as the “legislative agora” of the Union**, is particularly important.
- I would like to focus my presentation on **two main points**:
 - 1/The priorities of the first Bulgarian Presidency;
 - 2/The dossiers which are of specific responsibility for the AFCO committee.

1. The priorities of the first Bulgarian Presidency

- Bulgaria has the **rare chance to be a Presidency of the Council during interesting and exciting times**, when **complex but inspiring decisions will be taken regarding the future of the EU**.
- The **4 main priorities** of our Presidency are:
 - Future of Europe and young people – with an accent on economic growth and social cohesion;
 - European perspective and connectivity of the Western Balkans;
 - Security and stability in a strong and united Europe;
 - Digital economy and skills of the future.
- We will work on **youth and security issues as horizontal priorities**, in view of the complex nature of the challenges in front of young people and the contemporary security environment.

Those **priorities are interlinked** and the common point that unites them is, on the one hand: their **citizen dimension** and on the other hand: their **orientation to the future**.

- (Focusing briefly on each of these **4 priorities**, let me point out our main expectations and objectives for this semester.)

1.1 Future of Europe and young people – economic growth and social cohesion;

- The debate on the future of Europe is taking place during a time of increased global challenges.
- The Bulgarian Presidency aims to contribute positively and constructively to this debate, while focusing on:
 - **the political debate on the post-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework**, keeping the balance between current priorities and new challenges;
 - **the open debate on the decisive role of Cohesion Policy** not only for overcoming regional disparities, but also for promoting innovation, competitiveness and sustainable growth;
 - **the discussions on the deepening of the European Monetary Union** as we view the stability, openness and inclusiveness of the euro-area as a key precondition for the future of the European project;
 - **the structural dialogue with young people** on the future of Europe, as they are a **driving force of change and innovation** and they will live in the transformed European Union. That is why their opinion really matters in this debate.

In the past years the EU has been **focused on responding to crises**. Now, it is the moment to address the deeper transformations in our economy and society.

- In this regard I would like to extend my admirations to the European Parliament which has been the **engine of the debate on the Future of Europe** by **presenting your vision on how the EU to be reformed** in order to boost its capacity to act, restore people’s trust and make our economy more resilient.

1.2 European perspective and connectivity of the Western Balkans

- In terms of the specific priority of the Bulgarian Presidency – it is the European perspective and connectivity of the Western Balkans.

- As a **country which deeply understands the challenges and the opportunities stemming from the specific geographic position of our region** at historical crossroads of intercultural dialogue between East and West, we are strongly convinced that the prosperity, the development and the stability of our continent is related to the prosperity and stability of the region of Western Balkans.
- I remember the words of the **Great lady of France and Europe, Simone Veil** in her book “A Life” where she underlined that after the Second World War, while Western Europe had the chance to live in a **society of liberty and democracy**, the **Iron Curtain was dividing the other half of Europe** and it was unthinkable not to open the European Union’s doors for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe when the history provided this opportunity. Being EU MS from Eastern and Southeastern Europe, our country would like to give the same hope to the citizens of our neighbours as we had before.
- Today the EU doors need to remain open for the countries of the **Western Balkans**. During our Presidency we wouldn’t like to create **unrealistic expectations**, but we would like to **stimulate the motivation for positive change** to the countries and citizens of Western Balkans, based on a **credible and merit-based approach** as the **EU agenda is a reform agenda**.
- Concerning the connectivity in the region, we place an accent on its **multidimensional aspects – digital, transport, educational and energy dimensions**.
- One specific initiative in this regard, proposed by the Bulgarian non-governmental sector foresees the **staged reduction of roaming taxes** for the countries of the Western Balkans and we expect a **Road Map for the realization of this initiative to be presented during our Presidency by former MEP and current Commissioner Maria Gabriel**.
- Our expectation for the **EU-Western Balkans Summit in 17 May 2018** is that the Summit **should confirm the European perspective of the countries from the region**.

1.3 Security and stability in a strong and united Europe

- Concerning the third priority of our Presidency, our work will be focused on the areas of security, defence, migration and internal affairs.

2017 was the year of strategic political decisions, 2018 should be the year of deliverables:

- The practical implementation of **PESCO**;
- The adoption of the Regulation for the **European Defense Industry Development Program** that will allow us to start the European Defense Fund;
- The strengthening of the **Common European Asylum System on the basis of solidarity and shared responsibility**, following the decisions taken by the European Council last year to seek to reach an agreement by June 2018.

1.4 Digital economy and skills of the future

- Turning to our fourth priority – **Digital economy and skills for the future** – we are guided by the view that the EU needs to take full advantage of the new horizons opened by the Industrial Revolution 4.0 and new technologies. We need to foster the competitiveness of our industry and business, support the development of digital skills and ensure cybersecurity.
- To address these challenges the Bulgarian Presidency aims to continue the active work already undertaken in the framework of the **Digital Single Market, which should be finalized by the end of 2018**.

So, our vision for Europe in 2018 is one of a *pragmatic and efficient Union providing **more security to its citizens**; *a **competitive, energy-independent and innovative Union setting standards of employment and growth policies** fit for the Future of Work and the digital world; a *Union of ***improved connectivity, territorial and social cohesion**; a *Union that has taken firmly in hand the **management of the migration processes**; and last, but not least, a *Union that continues to be a force for **inspiration on the global stage** and for its neighbourhood, with a special focus on the European perspective and connectivity of the Western Balkans.

2. Dossiers of specific responsibility for the AFCO committee

Now, let me refer concretely to the area of responsibility of your Committee.

- **The AFCO Committee has an important role**, working on key dossiers related to increasing public confidence in the European project and driving the debate on the Future of Europe.
- The Bulgarian Presidency **shares the ambition of the European Parliament to bring citizens closer to the heart of the European Union.**
- So, we are looking forward to working with you on the priorities set in the Joint Declaration and the Programme of the Bulgarian Presidency.
- **Together we can put citizens at the centre of the European project, following three basic points:**
 - Citizens' participation in policy-making;
 - Transparency of interactions with interest representatives, and
 - Visibility, creating sense of European citizens' "ownership" of the EU project.
- **In terms of the first point,**
 - I believe that we all share that EU policy-making should be more **for the people and by the people.**
 - The **European Citizen Initiative** is an important instrument for European debate and democratic participation. For this reason, we have to work to increase its full potential by giving citizens stronger possibilities to express their vision for EU policies. The **European Citizens' Initiative is a priority for our Presidency.** We have begun the examination of the proposal and we will continue this work, doing our utmost to achieve as much progress as possible.
- **In terms of the second point,**
 - **Transparency** is important for public trust in the activities of the Union.
 - A key file in this regard is the **Interinstitutional Agreement on the Transparency Register, which we believe will increase the transparency and tracability of the interactions between interest representatives and EU institutions.** The IIA on a mandatory Transparency Register is an important dossier for the Council, and a priority for the Bulgarian Presidency. As you know, the **Council has a**

mandate. Therefore, we are **looking forward to starting interinstitutional negotiations next week** on 29th of January at technical level.

➤ **In terms of the third point,**

- Giving our citizens the opportunity for **democratic oversight** on the functioning of EU political parties and foundations is highly important.

- During our Presidency we will work together on the Regulation on the statute and funding of European Political Parties and European Political Foundations for strengthening their transparency and visibility to EU citizens. **The Council's mandate is being prepared,** and we are **making good progress.** The Presidency is fully committed to moving ahead on this file and to start trilogies as soon as possible.

➤ Apart from the legislative initiatives included in the Joint Declaration, taking into account the forthcoming European Parliament elections in 2019, the Presidency is committed to further proceed, together with your committee, with several other files. To mention just some of them – the **Date for the EP elections, the Reform of the European electoral law and the Composition of the European Parliament.**

- Concerning the question of the date of the next EP elections, we have **received the letter by President Tajani** on the preferred date of the Parliament and we will keep the Parliament informed of developments on this issue. We **will continue the work** with a view to a Council decision as soon as possible.

- The electoral process is also closely related to the topic of the composition of the European Parliament. We are aware that the decision should be adopted by the European Council sufficiently in advance to enable Member States to adopt in good time the necessary national measures for the holding of the European Parliament elections.

In this regard, I am sure you fully share our sense of urgency and we look forward to receiving your initiative. I know that you will be dealing with the file tomorrow. I look forward to reading your position in AFCO and in plenary during the next session in February.

As regards the reform of the European electoral law, as you know, the discussions led by successive presidencies have confirmed the difficulties with this file in the Council. The Estonian Presidency has carried out a detailed mapping exercise in the Council, which was discussed in Coreper in December last year. Following this, the Estonian colleague Matti Maasikas met with the two rapporteurs on 12 December and shared the state of play. Our Presidency will carry on discussions in the Council, and hopefully will come back with a proposal.

➤ So in conclusion, **we have a very dynamic agenda in front of us**. It is the commitment of the Bulgarian Presidency to work intensively and constructively on delivering concrete results. To achieve this, **we strongly count on the fruitful cooperation and permanent contacts with you, the members of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs**. In this regard, I would like to underline that the Presidency is fully committed to ensure the implementation of the Inter-institutional Agreement on **Better Law-making** and is pleased that the three institutions are cooperating well to this purpose.

➤ At the end I would like to share an inspirational phrase from the French writer Marcel Proust, who said: Le véritable voyage de découverte ne consiste pas à chercher de nouveaux paysages, mais à avoir de nouveaux yeux.

I hope that our common work and joint efforts during this semester will enable us and European citizens to see the European Union with new eyes, creating a more united and strong Europe together.



Thank you for your kind attention!