

**Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Venizelos' intervention on the EU-Russia Summit Meeting at the European Parliamentary Plenary (Strasbourg, 5 February 2014)**

Mr. President,

Even though the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU did not participate in the Summit Meeting with Russia, I have the pleasure of briefing you, representing High Representative Ashton.

The Summit with Russia provided the opportunity at the present turn of affairs for a discussion of certain fundamental issues with Russia. It is necessary that we convey a strong message: that the recent critical developments have to be dealt with so that the Partnership can be put on the right track.

This concerns the differences over the Eastern Partnership and Ukraine, as well as certain issues of a commercial nature, which are irritants that could easily be resolved. The commitments that have been undertaken within the framework of the WTO, as well as those that concern human rights and fundamental freedoms, must be respected.

A sincere and open dialogue was held on these issues at the Summit. We welcome, in particular, Russia's readiness to participate in such a discussion. We believe that Russia sees both the challenges that these developments hold for our relations and the fact that Russia itself has a strong interest in maintaining this cooperation in as constructive a framework as possible.

I know that Commissioner Füle, who has made great efforts regarding the Eastern Partnership, will have more to say on these issues and on the results of the talks.

Allow me to underscore that, for both sides, the degree of our interdependency is clear. The EU is by far Russia's largest trade partner, accounting for 45% of total Russian trade exports, and Russia is the EU's third largest trade partner, after the U.S. and China.

Security on our common continent and beyond can be achieved only if Russia and the EU collaborate closely. Bearing this in mind, it is important for us to note that the cooperation between the EU and Russia on foreign policy issues was assessed positively during the Summit.

Both sides appreciated their good cooperation on the issue of Iran's nuclear programme, and Russia congratulated High Representative Ashton on her personal contribution to the successful outcome of the E3+3 talks. For a permanent solution to be achieved on the issue with Iran, the continuation of this good EU-Russian cooperation remains of vital importance.

With regard to Syria, we are now working much better with Russia, particularly within the framework of the Geneva II Conference. The EU emphasized the need to provide humanitarian aid to the citizens of Syria, and this was a key point in the interventions at the opening of the Conference in Montreux, to which the UN Secretary General invited the Foreign Ministers of many countries.

Obviously, the situation in Ukraine played an important role at the Summit, but it was not the only issue. Russia proposed new trilateral talks on Ukraine, but the EU did not accept this proposal, because our bilateral relations must remain bilateral.

The agreement on the opening of bilateral consultations – on the level of experts – on the Eastern Partnership and the DCFTAs and their possible repercussions for the Russian economy constitutes an important development. We hope that these meetings will be a platform for constructive dialogue between the EU and Russia in the coming time, improving cooperation and understanding ahead of the Sochi Summit on 3 June.

Another important development was the adoption of a joint statement on cooperation in confronting terrorism. In this statement, we reiterated our commitment to work together to confront the terrorist threat, based on respect for the rule of law and human rights.

Mr. President, Honorable Members of European Parliament,

Given recent events, the Summit was not expected to be particularly easy. However, we had the opportunity to talk sincerely, and I think that this sincerity was shared by the other side, and that we made a good start towards putting our relationship back on the right track. There are a number of issues that we can deal with only through close cooperation. Thus, both the EU and Russia have a strong interest in working together. This certainly doesn't deter us from expressing ourselves openly, when necessary. I think that we succeeded in achieving both during last week's Summit Meeting.

Thank you for your attention.

## **REPLY**

Thank you Mr. President. I listened carefully to the many important statements from the honorable MEPs, and I must stress that I fully respect, and we fully respect, as the Presidency, all the sensitivities: national, historical, geographical and ideological sensitivities. It was a very constructive and helpful debate following the experience of the recent Summit Meeting, which Mr. Füle and I described to you.

We agree, as the Presidency, with all of those who think that, as the EU, we have only one choice: To shape a constructive relationship with Russia. Russia is not an easy or simple partner, but Russia is a necessary and critical partner. New dividing lines and new spheres of influence in Europe must certainly be avoided.

Our knowledge of history would be totally lacking if we allowed things to evolve towards dilemmatic or divisive situations. This would be counter to European and Russian interests. The improvement of EU-Russian relations will yield multiple benefits. It's not just trade and investments, though these are certainly fundamental relations that also impact the direction of our policies. So the obstacles to commercial transactions must come down. Bilateral trade

must increase, and is increasing in any case. We must exploit all of these, given that the major European priority is growth and the creation of new jobs.

But there are also political issues. We cannot have a conversation about the Summit Meeting and the EU-Russian partnership and forget everything we have said in previous discussions, even here in the European Parliament Plenary, regarding how critical EU-Russian cooperation is for the developments in Syria, for the developments in Iran and the achievement of a definitive agreement on the monitoring of the nuclear programme.

It is obvious that when we look at the EU-Russian partnership we also take into account how U.S.-Russian relations are developing. When we talk about EU-Russian relations, we certainly take NATO-Russian relations and the functioning of the NATO-Russia Council into account.

To use an observation made by Mrs. Giannakou earlier, we really do have to look at what the added value of European policy is with regard to Russia. Speaking personally, I frequently have the impression that EU policy on Russia is often smaller than the sum of the political relations the individual member states have bilaterally with Russia.

We need a European added value, something greater than the sum of bilateral relations with Russia. And this is clearly visible in many sectors. I think the most salient example is in the energy sector. We had the opportunity to discuss this issue in greater depth with the Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET).

We have before us certain tools that we must use, beyond the intensification of trade transactions. There is the conclusion of a more ambitious, comprehensive new agreement. There is always the issue of facilitating entry visas, which concerns European tourism destinations in particular, and, eventually, the waiving of visa requirements, when conditions allow for this.

We have to achieve progress on these issues, naturally bearing in mind the strategic framework of our relations. We have to dedicate many hours of debate in the both the Council and the European Parliament to the strategic framework and equilibria, and I believe that this debate has already been a great help in setting down extremely useful views that I noted and will convey to the Council, which will very soon be discussing EU-Russian relations again.

Thank you.