

Visit of the European Parliament's Former Members Association,

Monika Panayotova, 3 June 2018, Sofia

- I would like to thank you for the kind invitation to present our objectives and activities in the framework of the first Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU 2018. Your visit coincides with the **concluding and most intensive part** of the Bulgarian Presidency – its **final month**.
- It is also a great pleasure for me to welcome you in Sofia. Maybe not all of you know that Sofia's motto is "**Growing but not aging**". Indeed, our city deserves this motto, because it is ever developing. It is rated among the **top ten most attractive cities in the world for entrepreneurship** and for starting a business. A key factor in this regard is the excellent communication infrastructure – Bulgaria is among the countries with fastest Internet in Europe. Fast-growing start-ups create a vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem in Sofia. [It is an interesting fact that Bulgaria ranks #1 in female ICT specialists among the EU countries with 31% share, almost double the EU-average. This gives us the certainty that we can contribute positively to the political discussion and policy work of the European Union in the area of the digital transformations.]
- As a former MEP it is a special honour for me to be able to share with you our work as a Presidency. We are at a **decisive moment for the European project**, when the debate on the Future of Europe is taking place. This is also a moment when the interest of **European citizens and particularly of young people** must remain at the top of our agenda.
- The four key priorities are as follows:
 - **Future of Europe and Young People – economic growth and social cohesion**
 - **Digital Economy and Skills for the Future**
 - **European Perspective and Connectivity of the Western Balkans**
 - **Security and Stability in Strong and United Europe**
- Those priorities are interlinked and they aim to *guarantee a European response to current challenges and also to *bring back citizens into the heart of the European project. Therefore each of those priorities has a **strong citizens' dimension and future-orientation**.

- Let me share with you some of our key objectives regarding each of the 4 priorities:
- The first priority **Future of Europe and Young People with an accent on economic growth and social cohesion**, reflects our understanding that today is the moment to think strategically and to consider the deeper transformations in our economies and societies, while focusing in particular on young people who have the strongest potential to be the visionaries that Europe needs. We need to consider that more than 40 % of Europeans are under the age of 35. And if for the silver generations, Europe was the **point of arrival**, for the young Europeans, Europe is **the point of departure**, since it is all they have ever known.¹.
- The debate on the future of Europe is taking place at times of increased global challenges. The Bulgarian Presidency aims to contribute positively and constructively to this debate. A key focus in this regard is the **political debate on the post-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework**, because we see the MFF as an instrument for long-term investment in the policies and priorities which are of key importance for the European citizens and business. We realize the importance of the process of formulation of the next EU budget post-2020, in the context of Brexit and in relation to the new challenges in front of the EU. The next MFF needs to find the right balance between traditional priorities and new challenges. For this reason, since the beginning of our Presidency we started to prepare the debate with a series of conferences, mainly on the political priorities, as we are convinced that the budget is an **instrument for policy-making, not just accounting exercise**.
- In the context of the debate on the Future of Europe, let me underline that we strongly welcome the **initiative of President Tajani** and the European Parliament to invite EU heads of state and government to an open and constructive discussion at the Plenary on the Future of Europe. Now is the right time to debate on the possible ways ahead to consolidate and reinvigorate our European project. I am convinced that the European Parliament, as a living forum for discussion, is the most appropriate place for such a debate.

¹ In this regard, we welcome the Commission's initiative Towards a **European Education Area by 2025**, which aims to take benefit of the full potential of education and culture as drivers for job creation, economic growth and social fairness. It focuses on **key areas** like mobility, mutual recognition of diplomas, language learning and digital skills, European network of universities.

Youth Goals: In April more than 250 young people from 40 countries were in Sofia for discussions with key decision makers on their vision for the new EU Youth Goals in the context of the future of Europe. Following consultations carried out among at about 50 000 young Europeans, the young delegates elaborated 11 goals: **Sustainable and green Europe; Information and constructive dialogue; Equality of all genders; Youth organisations and European programmes; Connecting EU with youth; Quality employment for all; Quality learning; Moving rural youth forward; Mental health and wellbeing; Inclusive societies; Space and participation for all.**

- The second priority, **European Perspective and Connectivity of the Western Balkans** is the specific priority of our Presidency. As a **country, which deeply understands the challenges and the opportunities stemming from the specific geographic position of our region**, we are strongly convinced that the prosperity, the development and the stability of our continent are related to the prosperity and stability of the region of Western Balkans.
- I am sure we will 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 which was from the other side of the Iron curtain, our country would like to give the same hope to the citizens of our neighbours from Western Balkans as we had before.
- So, our ambition when setting this priority was, on the one hand, *to motivate our partners* in the region to continue their positive transformations, and on the other hand, *to focus on physical and human connectivity* which provides citizens with tangible results and opportunities.
- **The EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia** last month was a cornerstone of this process. The Summit successfully achieved its 3 main objectives: 1) to reaffirm the European perspective of the region; 2) to launch concrete and visible initiatives to improve the physical and human connectivity, and 3) to address how to better engage together on shared challenges such as security and migration.
- In line with these objectives, the EU leaders agreed on the **Sofia declaration**, with which the Western Balkans partners have aligned themselves and adopted **the Sofia priority agenda**, outlining new measures for enhanced cooperation with the region. Three other documents were also adopted to give a start to concrete projects: **Memorandum of Understanding** between the European Investment Bank and Serbia; **Joint Declaration** for the construction of a gas connector between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of Serbia; **Statement of support** for the Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans.
- We are certain that the European perspective and connectivity of the Western Balkans will remain on the EU agenda, as it is a long term and joint priority with our colleagues from Austria, Romania and Croatia. We are pleased to see the commitment of the Croatian Presidency to host a follow-up EU-Western Balkans Summit in 2020.

- Turning to our third priority **Security and Stability**, our aim is to respond to the need of our citizens for security and stability in the increasingly insecure environment. As the latest Eurobarometer shows, **European citizens expect the EU to protect them** and to be a pillar of stability. In this regard, the Bulgarian Presidency is working to 1) **enhance the security of EU citizens**, 2) **to strengthen the border control** and 3) **to manage more efficiently the migratory processes**.
- The fourth priority **Digital Economy and Skills for the Future** reflects our understanding that we need to prepare our citizens and society as a whole for the digital world. Digitisation opens the door towards numerous opportunities, but to take full advantage, we need to prepare our industry, adapt our policies and boost the digital skills of Europeans. This requires moving forward with a number of important dossiers on the negotiating table, in the areas of **telecommunications, copyright, audio-visual media services, online sales and cybersecurity**, with the aim to achieve the completion of the DSM by the end of 2018.
- But **no Presidency can succeed alone** in the implementation of its priorities. Therefore, we place strong accent on the **Parliamentary dimension²** and on the relations with the EP, as a guarantor for the democratic legitimacy of European policies and the representation of the interests of the European citizens. Why do we think this is important?
- **Firstly**, because we are aware that the EU negotiation process is a **complex combination of institutional interests, governmental preferences, leadership strategies and normative procedures** for reaching agreement and policy-making. The rulebook of the Lisbon Treaty completely changed the role of the European Parliament, turning it into a genuine co-legislator, together with the Council. The legislative weight between the two institutions is now **equally balanced**, and I know that many of you have personally worked hard for the achievement of this new role for the EP.

² **Events Parliamentary dimension of the Bulgarian Presidency:** 21-22 January - Meeting of the Chairpersons of the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of the Parliaments of the EU - Chairpersons' COSAC; 15-17 February - Interparliamentary Conference for the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defense Policy; 19-20 February - Interparliamentary Conference on Stability, Economic Coordination and Governance in the EU; 18-19 March - Meeting of the Joint Parliamentary Scrutiny Group on Europol; 13-14 May - Meeting of the Chairpersons of the Energy Committees of the Parliaments of the EU; 17-19 June - LIX Plenary Meeting of the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of the Parliaments of the EU (LIX Plenary COSAC).

- **Secondly**, because we recognize the fact that the success of a Presidency is **measured by its performance**, or in other words – by the progress achieved in the negotiations of concrete legislative initiatives. Considering the fact that today around 90% of EU legislation is adopted through the ordinary legislative procedure (according to data from the 2009-2014 EP term), we realize how important it is to work in a close and open cooperation with the EP in order to ensure the continuity of the EU agenda.
- **Thirdly**, because we are at the end of the legislative term of the EU institutions and there is **strong pressure to deliver** on all legislative and non-legislative initiatives that are underway, before the EP elections in 2019. Overall, we are working on more than 180 legislative files, most of them in cooperation with the EP.
- **In conclusion, it is not an overstatement to define the first Bulgarian Presidency as a historical occasion** for us. We have now started its final month and as you know, the next opportunity will be in around 14 years! We strongly believe that one of the most important tasks of any Presidency is to demonstrate that the **European institutions can work together effectively and cooperatively**, in the benefit of European citizens. In this regard, we fully support the message of **our Presidency motto “United we stand strong”**.
- A key message, written on the House of our National Parliament, it is reflection of our history and statehood, and of the idea of unity among the Member States and the institutions of the European Union, which is a key condition for the present and the future of our project.
- Thank you very much for your attention.

Speech delivered by Monika Panayotova, PhD, Deputy Minister for the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Minister Delegate for the Relations with the European Parliament, during the visit of the European Parliament’s Former Members Association to Sofia (3-5 June 2018)