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NOTE

from: General Secretariat of the Council
to: Delegations
Subject : Plenary Session of the European Parliament, 11 September 2013
Pressure exercised by Russia on countries of the Eastern Partnership in the context of the upcoming summit in Vilnius

Commissioner Füle, in his statement strongly condemned different types of pressure exercised by Russia on the European Union's Eastern neighbors, especially Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine. He said that it was unacceptable to use threats like misuse of energy pricing, artificial trade obstacles and cumbersome customs procedures, against ex-Soviet states which are seeking closer ties with the EU. He was convinced that such actions clearly breached the principles to which all European states had subscribed, recalling that in the Helsinki Principles of the OSCE, signatories had committed themselves to respect each country's right to define freely and conduct as it wished its relations with other states in accordance with international law.

He said that Russian action was not how international relations should function in Europe in the 21 century.

The Commissioner acknowledged that it was true that the Russian-led customs union membership was not compatible with the deep and comprehensive free trade areas (DCFTAs), which the EU have negotiated with Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia. He explained that this was not because of ideological differences, or about a clash of economic blocks or zero-sum games, but due to legal incompatibilities.

The Commissioner said it would be possible for Eastern partnership countries to increase cooperation with the customs union in an observer-status role and the EU would encourage its partners to seek deeper ties with Russia in accordance with their Association Agreements obligations. Commissioner Füle also said that the EU's Association Agreements are not conceived at Russia's expense and that Russia would benefit greatly from closer European integration. The EU vision, in his view, is that these agreements should contribute in the long term to the eventual creation of a common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok, based on WTO rules. The Commissioner believed that the gradual integration of Eastern Partnership countries with the EU is compatible with good neighborly relations with Russia, and Moscow should fully respect these countries' sovereign right to make their own political choices. Commissioner Füle said that the upcoming Eastern Partnership summit promised to mark a momentous step forward in EU's political association and economic integration with several of its eastern European neighbors.

Speakers on behalf of groups

Mr BROK (EPP, DE) said that on the basis of the Helsinki Agreement and international law, people in Europe should have a free choice and it was not acceptable that Russia bring pressure to bear on these countries. He stressed that Europe must stay a Europe of free nations. For this reason the EU should clarify its position and work hard for success at the Vilnius summit, so that if conditions are met these countries could initialize or sign the respective agreements.

Mr ROUČEK (S&D, CZ) did not want to see a new iron curtain and a new division of Europe between the so-called west and the so-called east, namely Russia. He criticized the behavior of Russia and emphasized that the process should be finalized by signing the Association Agreements in Vilnius.

Ms OJULAND (ALDE, ET) stressed the importance of the upcoming Vilnius summit as one of the most important meetings regarding the EU's relations with countries of the Eastern Partnership. She was disappointed at recent events and even the language being used, which recalled a cold war mindset. She believed that Europe must respond and the EU must stand together against the Kremlin's pressure, sabotage and provocations and show President Putin that his KGB methods are unacceptable. She stressed that Ukraine was especially sensitive and the EU should unfreeze the financial assets and support Ukraine in its very historic choice.

Mr SCHULZ (Greens/EFA, DE) underlined the importance of standing up to the pressure and believed the EU would be able to reach a positive conclusion in Vilnius.

Mr TANNOCK (ECR, UK) said the EU must do what it can to help the Eastern Partnership countries and build political and cultural links with them, whatever they decided for the future.

Mr SCHOLZ (GUE/NGL, DE) said that the eastern neighborhood policy is geo-strategically directed against Russia, therefore the neighborhood policy should be placed where it belongs, towards cooperating where there are common interests, and cooperation with Russia.

Mr SEVERIN (NI, RO) pointed out that recent events in the countries of Eastern Partnership are simply the result of the EU's weakness. He was convinced that Belarus was lost because of the dogmatic shortcomings of some of EU's policies. According to him the EU was imposing much conditionality. He considered that Azerbaijan would be lost because the EU did not see the importance of that country. He drew attention to the strategic importance of Ukraine. The EU was jeopardizing both the promotion of its values and the geopolitical security of its citizens. Mr Severin said that the summit in Vilnius would offer an opportunity that should not be missed.

Mr SIWIEC (S&D, PL) said that the Russians had ignored the neighborhood policy from the beginning and never cooperated with the EU. The possibility of involvement in this policy has been offered many times.

Other speakers

Mr MIGALSKI (ECR, PL) said that the EU had an obligation to defend human rights. He suggested a political boycott of the winter Olympics in Sochi.

Mr GERBRANDY (ALDE, NL) welcomed the views of the Commissioner. The EU would need particularly intensive diplomatic contacts with Russia to make the summit in Vilnius a success.

Ms ZDANOKA (Greens/EFA, LT) acknowledged the pressure exercised by Russia, but she was critical towards the EU, claiming that its policy towards a number of eastern European countries was one of protection of its own production and mentioned the example of Latvia.

She considered that some Eastern European Partnership countries learnt lessons from examples that show that the free trade agreements with the EU assumed capitulation of local producers in the interest of all the EU Member States.

Mr VULJANIĆ (GUE/NGL, HR) was not sure if the EU was able and willing to fully stand behind its words, financially and diplomatically.

Mr ZALEWSKI (EPP, PL) said that the decision of countries of the Eastern partnership was considered to be a threat to the authoritarian model of power in Russia. He questioned whether what President Putin was doing was not in breach of international law. He called for practical action by the EU, such as opening up EU markets, mobilizing financial aid, abolition of visas, etc.

Mr KIRILOV (S&D, BG) recalled that the partnership between the EU and Russia is of strategic importance and could create stability in the common neighborhood. However the recent unjustified measures and threats by Russia ran contrary to the principles of this strategic partnership. According to him the EU should be critical also of its own policies and he regretted that it was not active enough in contributing to the settlement of frozen conflicts, such as Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria.

Mr VAJGL (ALDE, SL) pointed out that Russia, also through the Syrian conflict, had found its way back into international diplomacy. It showed the influence it could exercise and its clear political interests. He thought that as Russia once again wanted to become a major player, it must abandon the logic of spheres of influence; otherwise this negative policy could lead it into international isolation.

Mr UNGUREANU (EPP, RO) believed that recent developments in the east were not accidental, but a direct result of Russian foreign policy. He considered that Russia was confident because it was not afraid of any consequences. He was convinced that the blackmailed partners need tangible political support and believed that the EU should offer its eastern partners more than a hypothetical chance of joining the EU.

Mr PLENKOVIC (EPP, HR) hoped that steps would be taken by the EU to sign and initial the agreements. He raised the experience in Croatia, where relations with the EU had fundamentally changed when there was the Association Agreement.

He was convinced that it is up to European diplomacy to find ways to strengthen relationship with these countries, while at the same time maintain dialogue with the Russian Federation.

Mr ZALA (S&D, SK) said that after four years of existence the Eastern partnership was reaching a make-or-break moment at the Vilnius summit and that Russia's pressure on the Eastern Partnership countries had created a geopolitical drama. He recalled that the EU's response should be firm but not exaggerated. The EU should reassure its eastern partners and proceed to signing and initialing the Association Agreements at the Vilnius summit.

Mr BERTOT (EPP, IT) agreed that the EU should defend its interests. However he pointed out that Russia was a significant economic partner for the EU and the role of Russia's trade for EU's businesses and economic activities was extremely important.

Mr BUZEK (EPP, PL) compared the current situation with events from more than 20 years ago when 10 countries of the Eastern Europe had decided to change the system from autocratic to democratic and towards free market. He said that it seemed that today the situation was more difficult, and called for the EU to be more determined and more decisive than 20 years ago.

Mr PAȘCU (S&D, RO) said that Moscow wanted to prevent another geostrategic loss. The EU should evaluate the adoption of concrete measures to alleviate the impact of the move against these countries.

Closing remarks

Commissioner Füle said he was convinced that the EU must communicate better to Russia that the Eastern Partnership is not at its expense and not against Russians or their interests. "It is not about political gain, but about the very pragmatic and practical issue of the extent to which our partners have sovereignty over their external trade policy." Commissioner Füle also emphasized that the EU standards were often adopted internationally and were fully compatible with WTO rules. The EU was actually helping its partners, including Russia, to modernize and open up to globalization.

He said that the EU is interested in the traditional ties and cooperation between its partners and Russia and to ensure that the policies of the Customs Union and the Eurasian Union are complementary. On concrete steps he promised that the Commission would look into the possibility of further increasing the wine quota for Moldovan exports to the EU. He said he was intending to send experts to see how to overcome some of the remaining barriers in other sectors, such as poultry.

In the end he said the EU would work with its neighbors to find ways of maximizing the compatibility between the European Union and Eurasian structures in a way that facilitates trade and economic integration.

On 12 September the plenary adopted a Resolution that criticized various forms of pressure being exercised by Russia on the EU's Eastern neighbors and called on the EU to present concrete measures to support the Eastern Partnership countries.
