

Key note Speech on “Eastern Partnership and its strategic importance to the European Union” by Ms Sofia Arkelsten, Chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Swedish Riksdag

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Your Excellencies, honourable Members of Parliament, officials, ladies and gentlemen.

I am happy for this opportunity to give a key note speech and to exchange views on the **Eastern Partnership and its strategic importance to the European Union**. Both as Chair of the Swedish Committee on Foreign Affairs and as a firm believer in the European Union, the Eastern Partnership is for me one of the most important questions for the near future and we very much welcome the attention that is given to this issue by the Lithuanian EU presidency.

As you know, Sweden is an advocate for a strengthened and deepened relationship between the EU and its Eastern European neighbours Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus. I am glad that over the last few years the Eastern Partnership has established itself as a long-term EU policy for bringing the six Eastern European Partners closer to the European Union. This has been based on shared universal values such as democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights. The Partnership is an expression for the EU's solidarity and long-term commitments towards Eastern Europe and expresses the EU's interest in the region. It is also a response to the wishes of the partnership countries for closer cooperation with the EU.

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) also involves the Southern Neighbourhood. That region is also of importance, particularly considering developments in progress in the area as we speak. But here today we are to discuss the Eastern dimension of the ENP.

I would therefore like to focus my speech on three overall remarks about the Eastern Partnership.

First, as the title of the workshop suggests, I would like to underline the **strategic** importance of the Eastern Partnership. This partnership is very much in Sweden's and the European Union's own interest. An important challenge for the EU is to contribute to an open Europe with a special commitment to developments in the neighbouring countries. I believe that the Partnership should be further developed as a priority of EU foreign policy. One example that shows the importance Sweden attaches to this cooperation and how this directly reflects on policy is the fact that the Government in July this year appointed a special ambassador for the Eastern Partnership. The role of the ambassador is to promote the partnership both within the EU and in relation to the partnership countries.

The outcome of the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius in November will be of crucial importance for forthcoming developments. The Summit is to highlight the achievements of the Eastern Partnership over the last four years and determine the next steps for the period until the Summit in 2015. I hope that as many as possible of

our Eastern European Partners are ready for Association Agreements including Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas at the Summit and welcome the fact that negotiations on Association Agreements, including Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, with Moldova and Georgia and Armenia, have been largely completed. With Azerbaijan, negotiations for Association Agreements (without Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas) are continuing. As we all know, Ukraine finalised negotiations in 2011 and there is an intense dialogue in progress with Ukraine to ensure that there is a clear understanding of issues requiring further progress for the signing of an Association Agreement in Vilnius. It is important to be clear towards Ukraine as to our expectations in line with the Council conclusions from December 2012. I will come back to these issues later during my speech.

Let's be frank with the fact that within the Eastern Partnership region the most difficult issues to deal with are the regional conflicts that are still unsolved. As well as the serious human rights concerns that exists in a number of countries and in particular in Belarus. I will not go into a lengthy discussion about these issues here today but would like to underline the fact that shared universal values such as democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights will always be at the core of the Eastern Partnership. These are values that can never be negotiated or restricted.

This brings me to my **second remark**. The strength of the Eastern Partnership lies in the wide range of instruments and policies that are brought together under one roof. This **comprehensive approach** ranges from the Common Foreign and Security Policy to trade policy and also to sector policies such as the areas of freedom, security and justice, transport, climate and energy. At the core of the comprehensive approach lie the shared universal values I just mentioned. The Eastern Partnership gives us a good opportunity for dialogue with the partnership countries when it comes to respect for human rights and our common values. This is an important task for us as politicians – and issues that are close to our voters' hearts!

Let me, with the example of recent developments in Russia – and we can also see similar tendencies in the Eastern Partnership Countries - especially raise the question of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender person's rights (LGBT rights). Over the past year, civil society in Russia has been limited by several new laws that strongly restrict the possibility to operate freely. For organisations that work for LGBT person's rights, this has been particularly noticeable. As you know, a Russian federal law was passed this summer forbidding propaganda of "non-traditional sexual relations" that could be perceived by minors. Sweden has criticised the law outright in its contacts with Russian counterparts and has also raised the issue in EU circles.

The issue was given some attention during the Athletics World Championship a few weeks ago. The Swedish high jumper Emma Green Tregaro and sprinter Moa Hjelmer made international headlines after painting their fingernails with the colours of the rainbow in a silent protest. The situation in Russia was the subject of one of the opening speeches during the Stockholm Pride festival – where seven out of eight political parties in Parliament took part. And with the upcoming Olympic Games the human rights debate shows no signs of losing momentum. It is important that we are clear about the fact that discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression is in violation of the basic principle of equal value and equal rights for all people.

Still, we see legal systems that do not deliver and fail to protect their citizens. We see laws against information regarding sexual health and rights. We see that Gay Pride Parades are attacked or not even allowed by the authorities. And we rightfully react to these things. And it is our task as politicians to right these wrongs in any way we can.

I am pleased that the EU foreign ministers in June adopted new guidelines concerning freedom of religion and conviction and LGBT person's rights. Although the EU has stressed the importance of LGBT person's rights on many occasions in the past, this was the first time that the EU made a more open and coherent statement about how the policy should be implemented and how the objectives of LGBT person's rights should be achieved in the EU's relations with other countries.

I am very worried about the infringements of LGBT person's rights and recent developments in this area. LGBT issues are not something that only matters to a minority. In a Union with respect for human rights – that recognizes them as universal and indivisible – it is not acceptable if humans are deprived of their rights - and that is something that needs to be politically and publicly discussed. Therefore, it is so important that the Eastern Partnership should provide us with a platform where we can discuss the question of common values and give us an adequate opportunity for dialogue with the partnership countries when it comes to respect for human rights, which of course also include LGBT person's rights.

Now that we have established the basics, let me elaborate a bit more on the issue of the comprehensive approach of the Neighbourhood Policy. In the context of EU foreign policy, this is the most wide-ranging and flexible policy we have. The aim of the Eastern Partnership is to promote the partnership countries' political association and economic integration with the EU. This is done through practical and concrete work in order to adjust to the acquis within different policy areas, harmonisation of legislation and the building of democratic institutions. But there is so much more to this than harmonising legislation and technical standards. The partnership also includes cooperation between different actors. In this context I would like to stress the need for increasing support for civil society. I believe that a greater involvement with civil society at large and especially with young people is important. Special attention should be paid to further enhancement of people-to-people contacts, support for youth and student exchanges, and scholarship programmes.

Let me also mention visa-free travel as one of the core objectives of the Eastern Partnership which when achieved would be of great benefit to the citizens of the partner countries. Being able to travel freely promotes people-to-people contacts as well as pro-European attitudes and the further building of civil society. It is important that the EU and the partner countries take steps towards visa-free regimes in a well-managed and secure environment.

In this group of committed politicians, I would of course also like to underline our role as parliamentarians. The fact that we, as parliamentarians from EU countries, are committed in our involvement with the parliaments of our partners is crucial in order to continue dialogue and promote reform objectives. Euronest plays an important and active role in creating a regular forum where members of the European Parliament and the parliaments of the six eastern neighbours can meet and exchange views.

As my **third** and last remark, I would like to mention a few words on the “**more for more**” principle. The EU’s relationship with each one of its partners is unique and long-term. It may take time to achieve all the goals and all partners should be encouraged to stay and move forward on the path of reform. Still, some of the partner countries will achieve these goals more quickly than others as a result of their deeper involvement in democratisation as well as in political, social and economic reforms and it is important that they experience increased commitment and support in line with the “more for more” principle. It is important for the citizens of our partner countries that the advantages of a deepened cooperation with the EU are very clear. Major achievements of political and economic reforms in one country, and a clear EU response to these, may lead to positive changes in the whole region.

The Nordic Baltic Foreign ministers met this Tuesday in Visby and made a joint statement on this theme. In the statement, they expressed our firm support for the objectives of the EU Eastern Partnership policy and acknowledged the important results achieved so far.

They mention their support to the signing of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, including DCFTA, at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius in November, provided that Ukraine demonstrates tangible progress.

And they look forward to the initialing of the Association Agreements with Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia.

They also stressed that:

“Any economic threat or political pressure directed against Eastern partners because of their European aspirations and engagement with the EU is unacceptable. Countries have the right to choose themselves what is best for their future. “

This last part is important to underline – especially in light of the recent news on Armenia wanting to join the Russia-initiated Customs Union. This decision is of course Armenia’s own to make but it is important that it is made without any pressure. It is clear that an agreement with the EU on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area is not compatible with Armenia joining the Russia-initiated Customs Union. As I understand it, Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian is heading to Brussels soon, and I hope this may cast some light over the situation. As a next step we expect clarifications from Armenia, and then we will be able to assess the consequences that this move may have.

The findings of the EU Neighbourhood Barometer released in March 2013 show that citizens in the European Neighbourhood area are generally positive about the relations their countries have with the European Union. The same survey shows that in terms of cooperation between countries, citizens in the East felt that the most important areas were ‘tackling poverty’ and ‘human rights’. This is what the citizens of the partnership countries want and these are the expectations the Partnership has to try and meet.

Saying this, I also believe it is important to be clear with the view that Europe does not end with what are today the external borders of the EU, and that Eastern Partnership countries have a perspective to accede according to article 49 of the

Treaty on European Union. As you know, the article states that any European state which shares our principles of freedom, democracy and respect for the rule of law may apply to become a member of the Union.

Finally, I would like to thank the Seimas Committee on Foreign Affairs for giving us this opportunity to exchange views on the Eastern Partnership and also of course for organising this very interesting and thought-provoking conference.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to our debate later on.