

# Opening Ceremony of the 35th session of the Joint ACP-EU Parliamentary Assembly - Statement by Mr. Yuri Sterk Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria

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Honorable co-President Mr Joseph Owona Kono, Honorable co-President Mr Louis Michel, Distinguished Members of the Joint Parliamentary Assembly, Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my honor and great privilege to be here today, representing the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU, at the 35th ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly.

Allow me to convey my sincere appreciation to all the members of the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly. I would like to commend your personal dedication in fulfilling the parliamentary dimension of our ACP-EU partnership. The ACP-EU Council of Ministers in Lomé took good note of the timely resolutions adopted by the Assembly on issues of joint concern for the ACP Group and the European Union in 2017.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

The 35th session of the Joint ACP-EU Parliamentary Assembly is of particular importance. The opening of negotiations on our future ACP-EU relations, after the expiry of the Cotonou Partnership Agreement, is fast approaching and negotiations are due to start by 1 of September 2018. I trust that the outcome of your parliamentary deliberations will feed into the shaping of our future ACP-EU relations.

Over the past months, the ACP and the EU sides have been working very hard to define our respective negotiating mandates, with regard to our relationship after 2020. I would like to congratulate the ACP side, on the adoption of its mandate at the last session of the ACP Council of Ministers. And I would like to reassure you that the EU is now very close to finalizing our own negotiating mandate.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

Allow me to explain the good reasons why Bulgaria chose its national motto – “United We Stand Strong” – as the motto of our first EU Council Presidency. The main value of the European project was to wipe out division lines and unite a fractured continent around the centennial dreams of its people - of peace, freedom, democracy, prosperity and justice. Europe continues to be one of the most attractive places to live world-wide, and one of its challenges – migration – provides a clear evidence of that.

We believe that our European ambition should inspire, not divide; it should be shared, not imposed.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

Our future ACP-EU partnership should build on our shared history, and on our shared core values and interests, and the EU is strongly committed to preserving the *acquis* of Cotonou and to ensuring that human rights, fundamental freedoms and political dialogue continue to guide our cooperation.

Our negotiations need to deliver an ambitious, comprehensive and forward-looking political agreement that advances sustainable and inclusive development. The EU is determined to ensuring that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is the overarching framework of our renewed ACP-EU partnership.

This ambitious objective requires a modernized partnership. A partnership that overcomes the donor-recipient relationship, and gives place to a relationship between equals, based on genuine political dialogue, and shared interests. An efficient partnership, with a simplified institutional framework, that is tailored to the specific realities and dynamics of the different regions. A partnership that strengthens our international cooperation efforts, allowing us to take mutual advantage of the opportunities offered by our inter-connected world and that is also geared to addressing global challenges more effectively.

In this regard, the Joint declaration on climate change adopted in Lomé, provides us with an excellent example of our international cooperation and how we can respond together to our common challenges. The Council of Ministers in Lomé also agreed that a joint calendar for collective action in the international arena should be drawn up. I am convinced that this is a significant step, and I look forward to our common actions ahead.

We, the European Union and the countries from Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific, need to further join forces to drive forward global actions in other areas of common interest, such as for example ocean governance, the UN reform, financial stability and trade. We need to enhance our clout in international settings, so that together, we can efficiently deliver on the 2030 agenda for sustainable development.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

Bulgaria fully shares the EU view that a resilient society which relies on sustainable development, democracy, and trust in institutions, lies at the heart of a resilient state. We also believe that a resilient state is a secure state, and that security is key for prosperity and democracy. Our upcoming ACP-EU negotiations should lead us to forge a comprehensive partnership that is focused on building peaceful, stable, well-governed, prosperous and resilient states and societies.

The Bulgarian Presidency attaches great importance to building resilience to crises. I trust that our future partnership will create the right incentives to target the key drivers of instability, including human right violations, and political, social and economic exclusion. We need an Agreement that spurs sustainable and inclusive growth and decent jobs for all. An Agreement that creates a solid framework for intensified cooperation, coordination and dialogue on all forms of conflict and violence.

In this regard, I am looking forward to the Joint Parliamentary Assembly's deliberations on the humanitarian crisis in South Sudan and the security situation in the Sahel, two pressing topics with far-reaching implications for both Africa and Europe.

The issue of migration remains a key priority for the Bulgarian Presidency. Migration is a complex phenomenon that impacts on countries of origin, transit and destination. Migration – when it is well-managed - can be a source of prosperity, and innovation. But irregular migration can also lead to devastating humanitarian consequences, it can increase the risk of human trafficking and human rights abuse, and it can also raise difficult challenges for individual countries and regions. Migration will certainly be an important chapter in our post-Cotonou negotiations, and in this regard, I am convinced the ACP-EU Dialogue on Migration and Development that we have nurtured over the past years, will prove to be useful in the framing of our future relations.

The Bulgarian Presidency has put a special focus on the fight against human trafficking. Bulgaria is a strong supporter of a more active international cooperation and resolute action for the eradication of trafficking and other forms of modern slavery.

We attach particular importance to early prevention, support for and reintegration of victims, with emphasis on the vulnerable situation of women and children. I take this opportunity to inform you that, at the initiative of the Bulgarian Presidency, a two-day ACP-EU technical seminar on trafficking in human beings will start tomorrow at the ACP house.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

A major priority in EU's external relations is eradicating poverty worldwide. EU's priorities efforts will continue to be directed towards those that are most in need, and these are the populations, primarily, in the Least Developed Countries, conflict-affected and fragile countries. ODA remains a major source of finance in these countries, given that their capacity to raise revenue from other sources remains particularly low.

I am proud to say that the EU and its Member States have maintained their position as the biggest global provider of Official Development Assistance (ODA) in 2017, according to the latest peer review of the OECD. The new European Consensus on Development reaffirms EU's political and collective commitment to provide 0.7% of its Gross National Income (GNI) as ODA and 0.2% of its GNI to Least Developed Countries within the timeframe of the 2030 Agenda.

Building on this effort, the future negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework should ensure sufficient funding for the priorities of the EU external policies. In this respect, Bulgaria prepared the ground for the Council to efficiently start its work on the Commission proposals from the outset.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

The EU is committed to leaving no-one behind, and one of the Bulgarian Presidency's priorities is to combat social exclusion. In this regard, I would like to stress Bulgaria is a strong supporter that our post-Cotonou Agreement pay specific attention to the challenge of social exclusion in Middle Income Countries. Indeed, Middle Income Countries still have high numbers of people living in poverty and high levels of social inequality. The EU has a remarkable experience in reducing inequalities and extending social protection, and it is my conviction that this experience could be usefully shared during our political dialogue

with Middle Income Countries, in the framework of our future partnership Agreement. Likewise, it will be important to capitalize on the transition experience of EU member states from Central and Eastern Europe, and ensure that we share lessons from our transition experience with Middle Income Countries.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

One of the key priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency is promoting equal opportunities and non-discrimination, and during our Presidency, we have put a strong focus on gender equality.

The Bulgarian Presidency is very pleased that we, together, managed to adopt the revision of Annex *One C* of the Cotonou Partnership Agreement. This revision allows us to reassign 425 million EUR in support of two very important global initiatives that are of utmost importance for us: the Spotlight Initiative and the Global Partnership for Education. These two initiatives will be financed through the intra-ACP envelope. Through interregional cooperation in many or all of the ACP states, they will contribute to women and girls' education, women's empowerment, as well as the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls.

The 35th Joint Parliamentary Assembly will have an important discussion on fighting racism, xenophobia and discrimination. Xenophobia is unfortunately on the rise in Europe. I am convinced that that our ACP-EU partnership, with human rights at its core, can play an important role in the fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and related intolerance in our respective countries and regions. I trust that our future EU-ACP Partnership will contribute to fostering tolerance and mutual understanding between our peoples.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

I would like to end by wishing you constructive discussions during this important Joint Parliamentary Assembly.

I hereby declare the 35th session of the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly officially open.

Thank you very much.

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