European External Action Service (EEAS)

Remarks by High Representative on the Foreign Affairs Council on 15 December 2014

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The main issue of today's Foreign Affairs Council was Syria. We started by preparing our discussion yesterday with an extremely good meeting with the UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura. I said this morning that you would have more details about the concrete support that the European Union can give to his efforts. First of all you might have seen already the conclusions we adopted through a very a smooth process, as they were already agreed before entering the meeting. This gave some space for a real in-depth political debate amongst all the ministers. The general sense of our discussion and our decision was first of all to not only give full and strong support to Staffan de Mistura, but also concrete support to his efforts, knowing that these efforts to achieve a strategic de-escalation of violence are and can be a basis for a broader political process. We refer to it in the conclusions in this way, I quote, 'a lasting solution to the conflict can only be a Syrian-led political process leading to transition'. This means also that we know very well that there is an urgency to work on the freeze, in particular the freeze of hostility in Aleppo. I know that very well, notably as I visited the border between Syria and Turkey just one week ago.. Aleppo is not only a city with a large population, it is also a city that represents an important symbol in the region and in the country. If we manage to work on the freeze together with Staffan de Mistura, supporting his efforts, it could be also one possible way of showing that reduction of violence is possible in Syria. This could even lead to a political process in the country.

The concrete elements of the EU support to the UN Special Envoy efforts can be on two levels. On one side, we have agreed to have a focused diplomatic effort in the region. This means, as mentioned in the conclusions, that the EU is ready to engage with all regional and international actors with influence over the Syrian parties. This sentence was not there in previous decisions of the Council,. This means explicitly that we will work with all the actors that have a say, that have a role, that can be part of the solution to the Syrian crisis, namely big Gulf countries, starting from Saudi Arabia but also Iran and Russia. We have decided that we will develop our diplomatic initiative towards these actors in the framework of the UN-led efforts. That means that we will try to facilitate, in all possible ways, a Syrian-led process leading to a transition based on the Geneva communiqué of 2012. The point is that after three years and a half of war, the Syrian regime is still there. We need to find other ways to stick to the same principles of the Geneva communiqué, but trying to find the most effective ways of facing the conflict.

The second level, apart from the diplomatic one, on which the European Union has decided to engage, is the humanitarian aid. This is urgent and we feel the sense of urgency. Again, having been at the border in Gaziantep last week, I met refugees and also humanitarian aid workers that are doing an excellent and very difficult job. Their work is done with the support of the European Union and of the Member States. The amount of funds of support that the European Union has allocated so far on the crisis in Syria is 3 billion euro both in Syria and in the neighbouring countries. And we know that we need to keep that effort going not only for Syrian refugees, not only for Syrian internally displaced persons, not only for the children - because we are losing generations of young Syrians who are not able to go to school, and this may become a major problem in 10 – 15 – 20 years from now; but we also have to do very much in the neighbouring countries -, Turkey, Jordan or Lebanon. In particular we have to work not only on the refugees, but also on the hosting communities. It is crucial that the hosting process of refugees doesn't turn into a major social and economic problem for countries that are already in themselves fragile not only from the economic social point of view but also from the security point of view. We know in particular for Lebanon this is going to be critical, and this requires our humanitarian help but also our political support. When I said that we decided to work on the humanitarian assistance for Syria, I also mean that if and when we manage to have a freeze of the hostilities in Aleppo, the European Union will have to be ready to come in with major humanitarian support, to make the life of the people in Aleppo dramatically better than it has been so far.

We have also launched an EU Trust Fund for Syria. This is an instrument that makes it easier to use the funds, more flexible, and especially quicker - which is exactly what we need. In case we get to a positive step we have to be ready to get a lot of humanitarian aid immediately in the city.

We have also discussed the regional strategy on our fight against Daesh. All the EU Member States are in one way or another - from a military point of view, or humanitarian point of view or narrative point of view, the culture point of view - involved in the fight against Daesh, and all of us are very much working on the support of the Iraqi government. I am going to be in Iraq Monday and Tuesday next week, visiting not only Baghdad but also Erbil, and different levels of institutions. I will convey the message of inclusiveness that can be implemented, as it is already on the way in Iraq. It could be a good way of moving ahead in a situation that only few months ago was desperate and now maybe allows us to have some hopes for the future.

Another point in which the Council has adopted Conclusions is Bosnia and Herzegovina. I paid together with Commissioner Hahn a visit to Sarajevo some days ago, in the follow up of the Council of November when we were asked to visit Sarajevo. We met with the political institutional leaderships there, to check if there was a level of engagement of commitment sufficient enough for us to want to engage in a process that could move Bosnia and Herzegovina closer to the European Union. The visit was extremely positive, we met with the presidency, we met with 12 political leaders in Parliaments, we met with civil society and we

came to the conclusion that ‘yes, there can be a new start for EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina’, and we have to take the most out of this possibility.

So the Council today has decided that we will be ready to re-sequence the order in which the conditionality will be faced. We have agreed with the ministers, after having agreed with the Bosnian leadership, that in Sarajevo there will be a work starting tomorrow to draft and agree on a written declaration, a written commitment, from the side of the presidency, of the leadership of different parties and a vote of the Parliament in Bosnia and Herzegovina to clearly state the commitment and the engagement of the leadership and of the population that is more than ready to move towards a European Union, to reforms, starting from economic and social reforms, but then also tackling the functionality of the State and all the different levels of the authorities.

We are ready to engage, we are ready to reciprocate in the moment when this commitment will be adopted by the Parliament, and we really believe - with a very, I have to say, positive mood and discussion we had with all the Ministers - that this could be a turning point in the way of Bosnia and Herzegovina towards the European Union. All the Western Balkans are European countries and we need to make sure that together we move towards that direction consistently and not only in words.

We had other points on the agenda with no conclusions adopted, but still extremely important. Let me mention two of them: one was Libya. We had a closed door discussion between ministers only and Bernardino León in a video conference from Tunis. He is, as we speak, working extremely hard on having a second phase of the Ghadames process, a political dialogue inside a country with different actors. I will not enter too much into the details now, it might be the case tomorrow or in the coming days, but let me just stress our full support to the political dialogue, full support to Bernardino's efforts and a strong call from all the 28 Member States to all parts in Tripoli, in Tobruk, everywhere in Libya to sit at the table and to start talks. It is clear that no one will ever be able to rule over Libya out of military means and that the political process needs to start.

The EU is ready and we will discuss that further. On one side, to do all that we can to support the political dialogue once it starts, or to take measures in case it doesn't start. Today what is important to do is to put a very clear, a very open unambiguous pressure on all sides in Libya to make this national dialogue start and work, because there is no alternative for the country to survive if they do not come to the table and talk among themselves.

Let me mention another two points before I leave you the floor for the questions. As you know, we are meeting again in a few hours with the Ukrainian Prime Minister as we will make today an important step: we have the first Association Council between the European Union and Ukraine. We didn't have Ukraine on the agenda today, but this does not mean that Ukraine is not on our working agenda every day, this is very much the case. And tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, as you know, I will be paying a visit to Kyiv. I will meet with

President Poroshenko, Prime Minister Yatsenyuk again, many Members of the Cabinet, Parliament, the opposition, civil society.

And then last point, but not least. The Council took note of the work that was done on Ebola. This was already discussed during the Development Foreign Affairs Council that took place last Friday in the logic of making full use of all the formats of the Council. So Ebola was mainly treated by the Development Council on Friday, we just had a short point today to take note of the written report that was done by EU Coordinator and Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs Stylianides, and that will also be adopted by the European Council on Thursday.

Let me also say that in view of the European Council I met yesterday with President Tusk to prepare the summit and to make sure that the work of the Foreign Affairs Councils in different formats and the European Council is as much as possible coordinated and going in the same direction. That – I would say – is the case. I would say that the cooperation is excellent. Thank you very much!

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