

Minister J. Kohout's speech at the XLI Conference of Community and European Affairs
Committees of the Parliaments of the EU (COSAC)

Prague, 10 - 12 May 2009

Your Excellencies,

Madam Chairman and Chairmen of the European Affairs Committees,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- It is a great pleasure for me to speak at this forum, which has brought you, the creators of European foreign policy and its parliamentary dimension, to Prague. It is you who take the reins when decisions are being made on the most important foreign policy issues.
- As you know, one of the priorities of the Czech Presidency is developing relations with the countries of Eastern Europe, which includes supporting the Eastern Partnership. The Eastern Partnership will be a suitable addition to the European Neighbourhood Policy. It will address each partner's situation according to such partner's specific needs and, at the same time, allow third countries to participate in various specific projects. I am certain that this new initiative will bring European relations with our Eastern neighbours to an even higher level.
- Despite the implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), a coherent model of EU cooperation with all of the Eastern partner countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) has been missing. The Eastern Partnership, which we had the honour to launch on May 7 in Prague through the adoption of the joint declaration at the inaugural summit, can definitely be deemed inclusive and positive policy and, in our view, has potential to provide this missing framework for the EU's external cooperation.
- Allow me to take a brief moment to remind you of our previous activities leading to the creation of the Eastern Partnership. In first place, I would like to mention the German Presidency, which came up with the concept of reinforcing EU policy in 2007, and although it is not the "father" of the idea of the Eastern Partnership, it can legitimately consider itself to be its "godfather".

- The European Commission responded to the German initiative ENP Plus in its Communication on ENP Reinforcement (December 2007), thereby giving space to deliberations on deepening relations with ENP countries in the form of new, reinforced agreements that would go above and beyond the framework of existing partnership and cooperation agreements.
- The Czech Republic, when it presided over the Visegrad Group (*June 2007 – July 2008*), took the initiative and led discussions on the topic of strengthening the Eastern dimension of the ENP. Poland and Sweden developed these ideas further under the name *Eastern Partnership*.
- Efforts to strengthen the Eastern dimension of the European Union's external relations are long-term and, in our opinion, justified. At the June 2008 meeting of the Commission, the Member States of the European Union recognised the importance of the Eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy and instructed the European Commission to propose the scope and form of the Eastern Partnership.
- The Eastern Partnership was discussed conceptually as the EU's new, strengthened and integrated Eastern policy. I am pleased that the March European Commission approved the Eastern Partnership concept and that this approval was based on a wide consensus.
- Our goal was to bring all of the Member States on board to allow the EU's Eastern policy to develop on the basis of a broad political consensus and backing and to ensure that our efforts would culminate with practical success. In this regard, we value the support that we have received from, and the openness to constructive debate shown by, all of the EU Member States, partner countries, and Union institutions, including the European Parliament, all having contributed to discussions on the form of the Eastern Partnership.
- After the European Council passed the resolution, we, together with the six partner countries, prepared the text of the Declaration, whose adoption at the Prague Summit

laid down the basic foundation of our future cooperation under the Eastern Partnership. Representatives of the partner countries were very active in negotiating the text of the Declaration and provided valuable and specific comments. Our objective was to work together to create a document whose wording would suit the varying scope of each partner country's ambitions and allow each partner to take part in the initiative according to its own volition and possibilities.

- In this regard, I see the resulting text of the Declaration drafted in Prague as balanced, sufficiently ambitious, and open to the further development of this initiative. Thursday's summit was an absolute success: it gave political weight to the Eastern Partnership and a dignified start to this historical and strategic step towards the European Union's efforts to better engage its non-Russian Eastern neighbours.
- The speakers at the summit broadly supported the Eastern Partnership; nevertheless, they stressed that it was not a blank cheque – the “joint ownership” of this initiative is the basis for its implementation; nevertheless, its implementation will also depend on the state of democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights existing in the partner countries.
- Invitations to the summit, which took place at the highest level in the EU27 + 6 format, were addressed to each of the Member States and partner countries, with the decision on the level of representation at the summit being the autonomous decision of each participant. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine sent their presidents to the summit. Belarus was represented by First Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Semaško and Moldova by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration Andrei Stratian.
- I believe that it is essential to the interests of both the European Union and Europe's Eastern partners that the partner countries on the Eastern border be stable, have a favourable investment environment, possess a responsible public administration, and develop economically. It is evident that our partners in Eastern Europe are themselves trying to strengthen their relations with the EU.

- The EU's policies toward them must be proactive and clear. The Eastern Partnership contains a permanent political message, namely the solidarity of the European Union, and supports democratic and market-oriented reforms and the development and improvement of human rights. This contributes to the stability, security and prosperity of the EU, of the partner countries, and of the entire continent.
- The Eastern Partnership will respect and differentiate between each partner's specific situation and the extent of involvement in specific projects according to such partner's specific needs and interests.
- The bilateral dimension offers greater mutual cooperation in trade and energy, supports democratic and transformational processes, facilitates mobility, and encourages mutual contact at all levels between persons, institutions, and companies.
- At the same time, however, the Eastern Partnership brings with it new elements of multilateral cooperation between the EU and the six partner countries in many areas, including energy and transportation. We are of the strong belief that the active involvement of each of the EU Member States, partner countries and, on an ad hoc basis, third countries in specific projects will benefit all stakeholders.
- One cannot fail to mention the significance of parliamentary diplomacy in the development of our relations with the partner countries. When it comes to the role of parliaments in the Eastern Partnership, I welcome the European Parliament's February resolution on the "Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument", a number of points of which also refer to the proposed Eastern Partnership. Alongside the existing inter-parliamentary assembly EUROMED, the European Parliament is proposing the establishment of the inter-parliamentary assembly EURO-NEST (EU-Neighbourhood East Parliamentary Assembly)
- The Declaration from the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit expressly invites "*the parliamentarians from the European Union and the partner countries to come forward with ideas regarding the European Parliament's proposal to establish an EU-Neighbourhood East Parliamentary Assembly (EURO-NEST PA).*" This idea was

further expanded by President of the European Parliament Hans-Gert PÖTTERING in his speech at the Prague summit.

- One of the basic ideas behind the Eastern Partnership is maintaining, improving, and strengthening contacts at all levels between EU Member States and partner countries. I believe that in the area of inter-parliamentary cooperation, the establishment of EURO-NEST will contribute to this.

- A particular challenge for all of us in this regard will be to find an appropriate solution to the extent of the involvement of the Belarus parliament. When negotiating the text of the declaration, the Belarus side indicated that it expected equal treatment and the same extent of participation as the other five partner countries.

- Ladies and Gentlemen: The Czech Presidency has contributed to defining the concept behind the Eastern Partnership and has helped to official launch this initiative. In the less than two months that remain, we, from our position of presiding country, will support the successful start-up of this initiative, especially in the area of multilateral cooperation of thematic platforms, the first such gathering having been planned by the European Commission for June. I believe that our Swedish colleagues, who will be taking over the Presidency in the second half of 2009, will expend no less energy on continuing to support the Eastern Partnership.

- Ladies and Gentlemen: It is now up to all of us in the coming years to provide the specific content of this common ambition. I wish us all a lot of success in this joint effort. I see COSAC as a meaningful, necessary and now traditional forum and wish you much success in your meetings and discussions. Thank you for your attention.