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EU – Syria Association Agreement

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

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Mr President, Honourable Members,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk to you today about EU relations with Syria.

I have followed closely the discussions in the AFET Committee on the report presented by Ms De Keyser. The report is a fair account of the internal and regional challenges facing Syria. I welcome this reflection of the European Parliament on the way forward with Syria. After the conflict in Lebanon and the new context of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, it is indeed timely to re-assess where we are with our current policy.

Syria is a long-standing partner under the Barcelona process and I fully share your views that we have a strong interest in bringing the country closer to Europe. Syria is an essential player for stability in the Middle East. It is a key part of the puzzle when it comes to finding a long-term solution to conflicts in the region and implementing Resolution 1701 in full. In this critical moment for the peace process, Damascus has the power to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. This means that we expect Syria, as you have stated in the draft resolution, to pass the right messages to Hezbollah and Hamas, to prevent arms shipments into Lebanon, and to help with a settlement on the Shebaa farms.

As I have indicated, I believe that re-engaging with Syria should be part of our strategy, a different issue is whether and how far we can re-engage now and here. The first thing we need to reengage with Syria is for its leaders to show their commitment and their interest in moving forward and taking positive steps on a number of issues. As you all well know, lately, we have gone through difficult times in our relationship with Syria and Ms De Keyser's report addresses a number of the political divergences.

The EU and Syria have negotiated a far-reaching Association Agreement with immediately applicable clauses on human rights and trade liberalisation. The Commission is convinced that the entry into force of the Association Agreement – which was initialled in October 2004 – and the implementation of its provisions would contribute to a better political and economic climate in Syria. Actually, Syria has already started using the agreement as guidelines for its reform agenda.

However, under the present political circumstances, it is difficult to envisage deepening our relations with Syria. Overcoming the political deadlock depends on the leadership's ability to translate some of its words of good will into deeds. Syria has a new opportunity, in this critical moment for the peace process, to demonstrate that it is serious about contributing positively to regional stability.

In the absence of an Association Agreement, we have limited scope to tackle matters of concern. Nevertheless, we have tried where we can and where we feel it is for the interest of the people of Syria. We have tried to continue programs in those areas that benefit directly the citizens of Syria. For example, on human rights, the EU uses diplomatic channels to address the most serious violations, including the cases of prisoners of conscience. We have also reacted to the limitations on freedom of expression and the wave of arrests that accompanied the publication of the Beirut-Damascus declaration last May.

But it is not by cutting off contacts that we will achieve much progress. With no dialogue, we have no influence.

We should turn the situation around: give a positive perspective to relations with Syria and set out the aspects where we expect progress. We do so in part through our co-operation programmes. Syria seems to be now well engaged on the road to economic transition and we welcome the approval of Syria's national agenda for reforms sponsored by Deputy Prime Minister Dardari last May. Support for the implementation of the reform process, including progressive steps to political opening, could be the focus of our action in the next years, if things go well. Co-operation under the ENPI will allow us to give Syria the medium-term prospect of full participation in the European Neighbourhood Policy. The ENP will then bring additional benefits and a more interesting package, when the time is ready.

As for the Association Agreement, it is still on the table. We have finalised all technical preparations and we have initialled the agreement. It is now pending a decision on signature from the Council. Signature is a process. So far, political circumstances have not been right. Member States still expect Syria to take positive and credible steps to make signature possible, including on regional issues such as Lebanon and the Palestinians. Syria's recent statements to facilitate the implementation of UNSCR 1701 may be encouraging signs in this respect, so are President Assad's calls for resuming peace talks, which have had some positive echo in Israel.

Mr President, Honourable Members,

As the European Parliament, the Commission is a strong believer in dialogue. I very much hope that the positive messages that we have got from Damascus lately will be transformed into deeds and that we will be able to restore a strong relationship with the country.

Thank you for your attention.