

The Visegrad Group and Germany Foreign Ministers Statement on the Eastern Partnership Bratislava, March 3, 2011

The Foreign Ministers of the Visegrad Group, namely the **Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia**, and **Germany** met in Bratislava to discuss the Eastern Partnership. The Ministers of the Visegrad Group reviewed progress in the implementation of the Eastern Partnership since their last meeting in Budapest a year ago (2 March, 2010) and appreciated the participation of Germany at the ministerial meeting and its substantial support for the Eastern Partnership. The Ministers welcomed an exchange of views on Eastern Partnership policy with the Foreign Ministers of Eastern Partnership countries, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine as well as the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Member of the European Commission for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy.

The Ministers reconfirmed their commitment to active engagement in the Eastern Partnership and interest to shape this process politically. They committed to continue the preparations for a successful Eastern Partnership Summit in Warsaw during the Polish EU Presidency.

The Ministers of the Visegrad Group expressed their readiness to **share experience of the Visegrad Group's countries on reform and transition with the Eastern partners**. They will seek to explore all possibilities for strengthened **Visegrad cooperation in the Eastern Partnership framework**, e.g. joint projects within a multilateral dimension, and to enhance the activity and visibility of the Visegrad Group within the Eastern Partnership, including by the International Visegrad Fund supporting Eastern Partnership initiatives. The activities of the forthcoming Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group were highlighted in this respect.

The Ministers underlined that EU credibility as a global actor depended on its capacity and will in supporting development and reforms in stabilising its neighbourhood. They called for all EU bilateral activities and support to the Eastern partners to fall under **the aegis of the Eastern Partnership**. They urged to make the Eastern Partnership more effective and visible. They underlined the active role of the European Commission and the EEAS in the implementation of the Eastern Partnership. They stressed the **need to strengthen the EEAS structures** responsible for the Eastern Partnership and to allocate sufficient resources.

The Ministers reiterated that a strong long-term relationship between partners and the EU could only be built only on the basis of **full respect for human rights, democratic standards, and the rule of law in the Eastern Partnership countries**. Withdrawal from democratic standards in specific countries of the Eastern Partnership was a matter of serious concern. They committed to pursue an enhanced human rights dialogue with the partner countries. In this regard they appreciated the importance of the **role of the Civil Society Forum** and supported broad participation of its representatives in the activities of thematic multilateral meetings. The Ministers encouraged the establishment of national civil society platforms in partner countries. They considered a structural dialogue with civil society in the partner countries as a necessary step for their democratic modernisation.

The Ministers welcomed the determination expressed by the Eastern partners to further engage in both the bilateral and multilateral dimension of the Eastern Partnership. They acknowledged their **aspirations towards European integration**. The degree of integration will depend upon the depth of political and socio-economic reforms and EU harmonisation. The Ministers expressed support for Eastern partners' efforts to this end and encouraged them to accelerate their political association and further economic reforms which bring them closer to the EU. They stressed the principles of **differentiation and "more for more"**, meaning more EU assistance and resources for Eastern partners ready to go further and faster in fulfilment of their commitments.

The Ministers noted with satisfaction progress achieved in the bilateral track. They encouraged **Ukraine** and the European Commission to finalise negotiations on the Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). They welcomed the determination of pro-European governments in **Republic of Moldova** and **Georgia** and their dedication to advance negotiations on the Association Agreement and to start negotiations on the DCFTA soon. They welcomed the launch of negotiations on Association Agreements with **Armenia** and **Azerbaijan**. Implementation of the Comprehensive Institution Building program will have significant importance for improving administrative capacity of the partner countries in all areas of cooperation.

Against the background of ongoing repressions and the first political conviction the Ministers reiterated their strong call on the authorities in **Belarus** to immediately release all political prisoners and to end political repression and harassment of the opposition, independent media and civil society. As stated in the conclusions of the Foreign Affairs Council of 31 January 2011, any deepening of the EU relationship with Belarus is conditional on progress towards respect by the Belarusian authorities for the principles of democracy, the rule of law and human rights. The Ministers agreed to continue the dialogue with Belarus, provided the Belarusian authorities prove their willingness to respect these principles. They expressed their readiness to consider further targeted restrictive measures as appropriate unless the regime releases all political prisoners. They committed to support a new facilitated EU visa policy to the Belarusian people. They expressed the need to increase assistance to civil society in Belarus and in this regard they welcomed the results of the donor conference held in Warsaw, on 2 February 2011.

The Ministers acknowledged that in order to deepen EU political relations with the Eastern partners, **political dialogue needed to intensify**, including using the informal Gymnich, sectoral ministerial or political director meetings. They also agreed that the **Information and Coordination Group** for interested third parties should be effectively involved in boosting support and assistance for the Eastern Partnership programmes and activities.

The Ministers recognised the importance of the role of enhancing and facilitating **mobility and people-to-people contacts** for the Eastern partners and expressed their strong support to carry out gradual steps toward **full visa free regime** with individual partners subject to political and technical criteria being met. They also supported the further facilitation of the visa issuing process as well as extension of the length of stay in the EU for certain categories of citizens, among others, students and researchers. They called for enhanced cooperation on asylum, migration and border management related issues within the Eastern Partnership.

The Ministers encouraged the development of economic ties and networks with the partner countries including by promoting direct foreign investment. They welcomed the launch of the **Eastern Partners Facility** and the **Eastern Partnership Technical Assistance Trust Fund**, as well as the idea to establish the **Eastern Partnership Business Forum**. They expressed their support for partners' participation in EU programs and agencies as well as **increased sectoral cooperation** with the long-term goal of **integration into the EU internal market**. They welcomed the readiness of the partner countries to secure their energy supplies and interest to discuss specific interconnection and energy diversification projects and modernise existing transit routes.

The Ministers called for the **adequate financing of EU policy towards the Eastern partners** in the next Financial Perspective. They called for merit-based differentiation within the ENP budgeting on the basis of more transparent and objective criteria. Specific financial support should be introduced for the most advanced partners implementing the EU acquis.

The Ministers acknowledged the Eastern Partnership as added value to the **fostering multilateral cooperation**. Additional efforts by all stakeholders were needed so that multilateral platforms, panels and flagship initiatives could be more operational, target oriented, and able to deliver visible outcomes that meet interests, ambitions and efforts of both the partner countries and the EU. The Ministers supported the idea of creating and attaching to the Warsaw Summit Declaration an annex with a **list of key initiatives and projects** that should be further elaborated by the Commission and implemented in the framework of the current as well as the next Financial Perspective.

The Ministers encouraged the European Parliament to activate the **EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly** and the Committee of the Regions to establish the **Eastern Partnership Conference of Regional and Local Authorities** in order to strengthen engagement of important actors from the partner countries on implementation of the Eastern Partnership.

The Ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia agreed to meet on the Eastern Partnership in the spring 2012.