

**Statement by H.E. Branimir Zaimov, Ambassador Plenipotentiary and
Extraordinary of the Republic of Bulgaria to Ireland**

On

***The Priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European
Union (1st of January 2018 to 30th of June 2018)***

At the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs

Houses of the Oireachtas, Dublin, 17 January, 2018

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Allow me to start by thanking you for your invitation to me to speak before the Joint Committee of the Houses of the Oireachtas on European Union Affairs. It is indeed a great honour for me to do so -on the topic of the Priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Mr. Chairman,

On January 1, 2018, a little more than a decade after its accession to the EU, Bulgaria took over the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU for the first time. For my country this is not only a great honour, but a great responsibility too.

During the Presidency of the Council of the European Union for the period 1st January - 30 June 2018, the Republic of Bulgaria will strive in a positive spirit towards achieving future-oriented realistic results, following the principles of transparency and accountability and realizing an 'open to citizens' Presidency.

Bulgaria will try to find a balance between the specific priorities of the Member States and the strategic priorities of the European Union (EU) to achieve real, visible results in active dialogue with citizens on European issues and responding to their expectations for greater security, employment, sustainable growth and a stronger EU presence on the world stage.

The leading principle of the Bulgarian Presidency will be to maintain unity and solidarity among Member States by offering compromise solutions within the Community method.

The Republic of Bulgaria assumes the responsibility during its Presidency to be a balancing party and a country seeking consensus, compromise and understanding among Member States on the adoption of decisions and the passing of draft legislative acts.

During our Presidency, we will promote partnerships at all levels based on an integrated approach and joint cooperation.

The Bulgarian Presidency will work on youth and security issues as horizontal priorities, in view of the complex nature of the challenges facing young people and the contemporary security environment.

Our goal is to respond to the real needs of European citizens and turn challenges into opportunities.

Mr. Chairman,

Today, Europe needs more SECURITY SOLIDARITY & STABILITY

To this end we will work for a

- **Secure Europe**, because the migration crisis and the terrorist acts over the past years have shown how vulnerable we are;
- **A Stable Europe**, because the citizens want to know that the European Union is taking care of their prosperity and wellbeing;
- **A Europe of Solidarity**, because all member states are faced with the main challenges and they can be overcome only with joint action, not at national

or local level. How are we going to achieve it? Through applying the 3 „C“-s- that is **CONSENSUS**, **COMPETITIVENESS** and **COHESION**

We are convinced that they are fundamental for the future of Europe, and for achieving them one needs courage, political vision and shared efforts. The key to attaining our common goals is unity. It is not by chance that we chose “**United We Stand Strong**” for our slogan. This is the motto of our National Assembly and of the Coat of Arms of the Republic of Bulgaria. This will be the slogan of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU 2018, which our country will follow in each action as rotational President. We will work for unity between the member states, as well as between the European institutions.

Mr.Chairman,

Tomorrow Europe will be what we make it today. Today is the time to build a stronger, more secure and a European Union based on solidarity. The citizens of Bulgaria and of the European Union expect to find concrete solutions to concrete issues. The Bulgarian Presidency will work in a transparent manner, be open to all European partners and, above all, to all European citizens.

Bulgaria will seek a broad **CONSENSUS** among the Member States on issues of importance to the citizens of the European Union.

- Security and Migration

As a President of the Council of the European Union, the Republic of Bulgaria will work on building and implementing effective mechanisms for enhancing the security of EU citizens, strengthening border control and more effectively managing migration processes.

Achieving a sustainable migration management system and increasing the effectiveness of the return policy will be a top priority, the realization of which will be pursued by enhancing the dialogue with third countries.

It will also be crucial to complete the reform of the Common European Asylum System, based on the principles of responsibility and genuine solidarity, and to finalize the discussion on the acts - part of the legal framework of this system.

In the field of security and combating crime and terrorism, the efforts of the Bulgarian Presidency will be aimed at improving the interoperability of EU information systems and databases; finalizing work on the proposals to amend the legal framework for the functioning of the Schengen Information System; laying the foundations for the effective implementation of the Passenger Name Record Directive for the purposes of combating serious crime and terrorism, and laying down uniform standards and procedures for security checks at borders and within the EU.

- The Future of the Western Balkans in the European Union

The European Union has a clear interest in stability, security and prosperity in the Western Balkans, where its rules and values are respected. Delivering a tangible

European perspective for all the Western Balkan countries, including a dialogue based on the fulfilment of the conditions and the principle of own merit, political will and decisive reforms by these countries, is key not only for the region but also for the European Union as a whole.

The Republic of Bulgaria attaches great importance to deepening regional cooperation and developing good neighbourly relations. We share the importance of the so-called connectivity agenda (transport, communication, infrastructural, energy) with the understanding that its aim is to improve the links with the EU Single Market.

The potential initiative for digital connectivity, which the Bulgarian Presidency plans to offer, is a step-by-step adoption of roaming rules within the European Union by the Western Balkan countries as well, passing through a gradual reduction in roaming charges and an increase in broadband internet access opportunities.

The priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU are based on the common framework, adopted in the Strategic Agenda of the Council of the EU, which sets the priorities of all Presidencies until the end of the mandate of the EC in 2019. The common priorities, adopted in the Strategic Agenda are- a stronger European economy with more jobs and growth and competitiveness, security for the European union by Empowering and protecting citizens, a secure energy and climate policies in future, Freedom, security and justice and guaranteeing the rights and freedoms of citizens, effective common actions of Member Countries in international relations - The EU as a strong global actor by strong engagement in world affairs.

Bulgaria will be a balancing player and will promote a **COMPETITIVENESS** environment that is important for the economic prosperity of the citizens of the European Union.

- A Competitive Single Market

During its Presidency, the Republic of Bulgaria will work to strengthen the Single Market as one of the most important achievements of the EU in building a stronger European economy.

We will focus on the Digital Single Market as a source of growth and competitiveness in order to achieve a greater share of online service users and the rapid penetration of information and communication technologies across all sectors of economy.

Meeting the challenges in this area is related to creating a clear and simplified legal environment that shall enable consumers to fully engage in the Digital Single Market and make effective use of online environment capabilities, regardless of where they are located within the EU.

We will work to remove the legal barriers to cross-border trade and to make real progress to address the existing regulatory barriers that hamper the establishment and cross border service provision within the EU. We will encourage a reduction in unjustified and disproportionate requirements for service business by applying a more sophisticated notification and verification mechanism to comply with European requirements and establish relevant business support instruments to

address the necessary administrative formalities, easier access to information and online procedures. Our efforts will be directed to:

- Accelerating the process of completing a competitive and fair Digital Single Market; supporting connectivity within the EU; updating the regulatory framework for telecommunications; enhancing the confidence and security of personal data in the digital space and the development of a European data-based economy;
- Developing intermodal transportation; enhancing the competitiveness and sustainability of EU air transport, and making progress on legislative proposals from the so-called car package;
- Fair and efficient taxation of corporate profits and preventing tax evasion and avoidance and tax evasion by terms of an enhanced administrative cooperation and effective exchange of information between Member States.

- Promoting Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation

Bulgaria will work to promote entrepreneurship based on digital technology and innovation, which has a leading role in the EU's economic and social development. This includes: progress in implementing the Start-up and Scale-up Initiative; developing alternative sources of funding and improving the business environment for small and medium-sized enterprises in line with the "Think Small First" principle; stimulating social innovation in economy, education, healthcare and information and communication technologies with a focus on young people, the entrepreneurial ecosystem and the development of skills and competences for the 21st century.

In addition, we will work to modernize European education systems and curricula by promoting the diffusion of common European values and social inclusion through formal and informal learning; confirming the role of teachers as key players in the education process and a factor for improving the quality and effectiveness of education; wide introduction of information and communication technologies at all levels of the education system.

- Economic and Monetary Union

The Bulgarian Presidency will work on creating optimal conditions for a strong economic growth in the EU through initiatives to strengthen the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). The Republic of Bulgaria will promote the discussions presented in the EU strategic documents, including the Five Presidents' Report, the Commission's White Paper and others, aiming at:

- Deepening EMU

Our goal will be to promote responsible fiscal policies that ensure the sustainability of public finances and respond to the long-term challenges facing EU economies, and continue the smooth implementation of the investment plan for Europe as a strategic tool to overcome the investment shortage in the EU and mobilize sustainable private investment across Europe.

- Reducing risks in the banking system, completing the Banking Union, and building the Capital Markets Union

We will focus our efforts on reaching political agreement on risk reduction measures in the banking system, and continue the work on the legislative proposal for the creation of a European Deposit Guarantee Scheme as part of the measures to complete the Banking Union. Bulgaria will continue to work on measures for building the Capital Markets Union with a view to strike a balance between bank and non-bank financing. We will work to strengthen the European financial system as well as to create more funding opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises.

- A Sustainable and Future-Oriented Environment

The Republic of Bulgaria will work to maintain the high standards of environmental protection and the population quality of life through sustainable growth and a 'green economy' with a focus on the transition to a circular economy and eco-innovation initiatives aimed at resource efficient use and reduction of the harmful impact on environment and human health.

The efforts under the Bulgarian Presidency will also be directed at initiatives to promote the use of different mechanisms, including innovative solutions, to improve the ambient air quality and to provide a sustainable framework on environment through a better regulation and full integration of sectoral policies.

- A Stable European Energy Union

Our main objective is to create a stable Energy Union and increase the potential of regional cooperation by promoting the construction of the missing infrastructure with a view to ending the isolation of some Member States from the European gas pipeline and electricity grids.

Ensuring the security of gas supply through diversification of sources and routes, protecting the energy critical infrastructure, as well as activities related to energy efficiency improvement as a contribution to the reduction of energy consumption, are among the key issues on which the Bulgarian Presidency will work to find sustainable solutions.

Bulgaria will work to increase the welfare of all citizens of the European Union by promoting **COHESION** that creates the conditions for unity and solidarity. The Bulgarian Presidency will make efforts to seek the most appropriate solutions not only for the future of cohesion policy but also for the overall cohesion of the European society.

Achieving concrete results and delivering European added value are of key importance to the European project and its implementation by means of the EU budget. At the same time, they are also typical features of cohesion policy leading to tangible results for all regions of the EU, which is why the future of this policy is an important priority for the Bulgarian Presidency.

- Reformed Multiannual Financial Framework post-2020

Putting great emphasis on the issue of stable EU finances, the Bulgarian Presidency will launch initiatives to continue the debate on a reformed Multiannual Financial Framework post-2020.

We will raise the issue of the future use of financial instruments in the focus of the debate on the growth and competitiveness of the European economy. We will work for the successful implementation of future financial instruments and the creation of a framework based on lessons learned and aimed at more efficient and flexible governance.

- Cohesion Policy after 2020

The Bulgarian Presidency will make an effort for an open debate on the future of Cohesion Policy and its role in the implementation of the EU's priorities after 2020, working to preserve its leading role in the EU budget after 2020.

Taking into account the need for simplification of legislation, rules and procedures widely identified by Member States, we will work to optimize the model of shared management and effective implementation of the principle of proportionality with a focus on results.

We will work to harmonize the rules of the European Union's funds and instruments and find the right balance between granting aid and financial instruments, as well as between traditional priorities and new challenges.

Investing in economic growth and jobs remains a top priority. In order to ensure their implementation and taking into account the tendencies for budget constraints and emerging new challenges, it is crucial to use the full potential of all programs and instruments. The key role of the European structural funds and the investment funds for cohesion and structural reforms in all EU regions will be further communicated to EU citizens.

- The Future of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) - Simplification and Modernization

In today's conditions of globalization and growing world population, the role of agricultural production and rural development as important economic, social and even political factors is growing. It is of crucial importance for the future CAP parameters beyond 2020 to be defined in a way that will help to improve the sustainability of agricultural holdings and ensure a stable level of farmers' incomes.

During the discussion on the future CAP, the Bulgarian Presidency intends to place the emphasis on preserving the CAP budget and on the instruments of the current CAP structure that have proven their effectiveness, including the Single Area Payment Scheme and coupled support, as well as on developing a sustainable agricultural production in environmental protection.

- Culture as a Strategic Resource for the Better Future of the EU

Culture is one of the main drivers of the future development of the European Union, based on a new look at its past. In the current political, social and cultural processes in the EU, we will focus our efforts on common values and the unifying links between European citizens.

During the Bulgarian Presidency, we will strive to build on what has been achieved so far and promote better inclusion of culture in the Multiannual Financial Framework post-2020 and in the new Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022, as well as

the enhancement of cultural diplomacy of the European Union as a tool for the EU's foreign policy.

Which will be the main priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU ?

1. The future of Europe and of the young people - economic growth and social cohesion

Economic growth and social cohesion are key to the future of Europe. There is some good news for the Union in the forecasts - the European economy is speeding up, more jobs are being created, investment is growing, public finances are becoming stronger. Still, there are some challenges - high levels of debt, small increase in salaries. We shall overcome these challenges together. It is important that the member states' economies continue to grow, it is important that all EU states participate in the debate on the reforms of the Eurozone as equals, regardless of whether they are members of the latter or not.

The future of the Union is to continue the efforts for social cohesion. The Cohesion Policy provides a real added value for EU citizens and is a proven example of a working instrument for reducing the differences between us, which guarantees the success of the European model. This is why our Presidency will work for an active and constructive debate on the Multiannual Financial Framework. We are aware that the world is changing, and overcoming the challenges requires resources. We are convinced that we have to look for a balance between the new funds and the already existing ones, between the financial instruments and the grant financing.

2. Security and stability in a strong and united Europe

Security and migration policies are some of the topics on which we need consensus and joint efforts. The Bulgarian Presidency will work towards long lasting and fair solutions in the area of asylum policy, for efficient policies for return and readmission, for a balanced approach between short and long-term measures aiming at the source of migration, not only at the consequences thereof. European citizens need security and stability and without these, European values are difficult to attain. This is why great emphasis in our efforts will be given to security, whereby we will focus on strengthening the border controls, on the exchange of information between the various bodies, and on prevention. It is important to work towards efficient, fast and fair justice.

3. European Perspective and Connectivity of the Western Balkans

When talking about united Europe, we should not forget that the Western Balkans need a clear European perspective and connectivity between them and with the member states. The ambition of the Bulgarian Presidency is to achieve a clear action plan with each of the countries, without creating unrealistic expectations, but with concrete steps. This is the way to have long lasting peace, security and prosperity in the region. The goal is to provide connectivity to the Western Balkan countries - transport, air, energy, educational and digital. Bulgaria invests consequent efforts in this direction, for example by promoting the digital policies of the EU among the countries in the Western Balkans through gradual reduction of roaming charges and by increasing the possibilities for broadband internet access.

4. Digital economy and skills for the future

Europe's role in the rapidly developing world is directly linked to the competitiveness of the European economy. The single digital market, the access to innovation, the link between education and the requirements of the future labour market are at the basis of technological development. It is not by chance they are a major element of the programme of the Trio of the Presidencies - Estonia-Bulgaria-Austria and a priority of the Bulgarian Presidency. Electronic communication, providing transboundary services particularly to the SMEs, copy rights, e-privacy and cyber security are some of the items on the agenda that need to be decided upon. Linking the education of the young people with learning "the skills for the future" is the way to achieve a competitive, flexible and successful Europe.

The focus of all our action will be young people. We are responsible to them where we are leading our Union. They are our common investment in the future; they should be given the opportunities of education and development. Fostering early childhood development, modernization of the European educational systems and curricula, strengthening social inclusion through formal and informal learning - these are some of the tasks that should not be put off. Today, in the time of information and communication technologies, more than ever before it is a *conditio sine qua non* for these technologies to be widely introduced at all levels of the educational system.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I would like to express my great satisfaction with the fact that the Taoiseach of Ireland, Mr. Leo Varadkar, during his very recent visit to Bulgaria on the 5th of January, expressed his Government's support for the priorities set by the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU. In his words „Ireland will support the priorities as set out by the Bulgarian Presidency and will assist the Presidency in implementing these priorities“.

Mr. Chairman, I will be happy to hear comments and try to answer any questions that members of the Joint Committee might have as regards our priorities.

Thank you for your attention.