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PARLIAMENTARY HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE S&D GROUP IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT • February 2014

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Swoboda on Ukraine: "Comprehensive economic reform and crackdown on corruption necessary for EU engagement"

As the interim government takes shape in Kiev, concerns are growing over a rift between the eastern and western regions of Ukraine. Hannes Swoboda, president of the Socialists and Democrats Group in the European Parliament, said to the media in Strasbourg:

"The rapid developments of the past weeks have given way to a new transitional leadership. Ukraine must now at all costs avoid retaliation and discrimination, and do everything possible to maintain territorial integrity. We welcome the announcement of presidential elections to give the Ukrainian people a voice in their future. To ensure a full democratic transition, anticipated legislative elections should also be held. The new authorities in Kiev will need to develop a long-term strategy for comprehensive economic reforms and the fight against corruption. This is the necessary basis for long-term engagement with the EU. We must not disappoint the hopes of the people who fought for Ukraine to engage with its European neighbours. Any serious process for a peaceful future for Ukraine must involve dialogue with Russia. I am concerned about Moscow's rhetoric towards the interim government in Kiev. In the interests of supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, Mr Putin should recognise the new leaders, especially after the presidential elections."

Libor Rouček, S&D vice-president for neighbourhood and enlargement policies, said to the media: "The S&D Group is concerned about the volatile situation in Crimea. While fully respecting the people's right to peaceful protest, we urge all sides to exercise the utmost restraint. The demands of the Russian-speaking community in Crimea must be addressed in a peaceful way – not through violence. A mutually acceptable political solution must be found to ensure the maximum protection for minority rights and to preserve Ukraine's territorial integrity. We encourage Russia to use its influence in a positive and constructive way, and refrain from action that might lead to escalating violence and separatist tendencies in Crimea."

Such a scenario would be disastrous for Ukraine and for European stability. It is in Russia's own interests to work with the new authorities in Kiev, and with the EU, to help defuse the current tensions and reach a lasting political solution in Ukraine."

Speaking on behalf of EU High Representative Catherine Ashton, enlargement commissioner Štefan Füle outlined three elements required for a lasting solution: a comprehensive constitutional reform, formation of a new inclusive government, and free and fair elections. He said the situation put a great responsibility on the new Ukrainian government to deliver the changes that people have asked for and on the EU to ensure that these changes are sustainable.

The S&D Group welcomed the joint resolution on Ukraine adopted today by the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

Click here to read the resolution in full:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=20140227&secondRef=TOC&language=EN>

Click here to watch the parliamentary debate: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ep-live/en/plenary/video?debate=1393423252908>

THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT VOTES TO CURB SMOKING

The European Parliament backed the new Tobacco Products Directive negotiated by the S&D MEP Linda McAvan. The main aim of the new directive is to deter young people from taking up smoking. It also addresses the existing legislative vacuum on electronic cigarettes. The author of the parliamentary report and S&D spokesperson on health, MEP Linda McAvan, said to the media:

"This is the culmination of years of work against the background of intense lobbying from the tobacco industry and its front groups. The new measures are a big step forward for tobacco control and will help to prevent the next generation of smokers from being recruited. We know that it is children – not adults – who start to smoke: the overwhelming majority of smokers start before their 18th birthday.

"And the recent trends in child smokers are worrying – this is why the law is designed to tackle the array of gimmicky products and packaging that the tobacco industry uses to attract young people and hook them into a life-long addiction. Smoking will ultimately kill one in every two smokers – it claims the lives of 700,000 people every year across Europe. Today we have set tougher rules, but member states are allowed to go further. The new law also introduces proper regulation of e-cigarettes for the first time. The final measures are very close to what MEPs voted for – e-cigarettes will not be required to seek a medicines licence unless they are marketed as an aid to quitting smoking.

Click here for the text in full:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=20140226&secondRef=TOC&language=EN>

IT IS TIME SWITZERLAND DECIDES TO KEEP ITS CLOSE RELATIONS WITH THE EU OR NOT

MEPs debated the future of relations between the EU and Switzerland in Strasbourg, following a referendum on the 9 February which saw a slim majority of Swiss voters choose to reject the free movement of EU citizens in their country. Hannes Swoboda underlined:

"Free movement is a fundamental part of the agreements with Switzerland – what the Swiss have rejected is not an optional extra. Many Swiss people also work in the EU and we won't allow such a crucial element of EU-Swiss relations to simply disappear. "Addressing the extreme-right groups in the EU who are seeking to capitalise on the referendum results, Hannes Swoboda emphasised that challenging the right to free movement in Switzerland also means that European citizens and voters will risk losing their jobs.

S&D DEFENDS WORKER'S RIGHTS IN NEW RAILWAY LEGISLATION

The European railway network will soon be improved with better inter-operability, enhanced safety, more transparent information for users and clearer labour rights for workers, following the vote on the fourth railway package. The Socialists and Democrats welcome the new legislation as a well-balanced and much-needed update of EU-wide rules and technical standards. S&D spokesperson on transport, MEP Saïd El Khadraoui, said:

"Inter-operability will create a truly European railway network. Inter-operable ticketing and information systems will have to be set up by December 2019, giving passengers access to all the data needed to plan a journey, reserve and buy their tickets – regardless of the operator or combination of operators they use. We have achieved our main priorities. The Socialists and Democrats wanted to make sure that opening the market will not undermine the protection of public service obligations (PSO).

"Another important goal we achieved is protecting workers' rights. The clause on minimum services in case of strikes has been voted out and we protected the right to strike in Europe. Railway companies will have to respect collective agreements in force in the member states they wish to operate in as a condition of obtaining and keeping their operating licences."

Click here for the text in full:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=20140226&secondRef=TOC&language=EN>

IN SHORT

Swoboda denounces anti-LGBTI witch-hunt in Uganda

A Ugandan tabloid newspaper published the names of 200 people it claims are gay, following the recent adoption of an anti-LGBTI (lesbian, gay bisexual, transsexual or intersex) bill setting out harsh penalties for homosexuality – including life sentences for gay sex. In the past, openly gay people and activists in Uganda have been attacked and even lynched.

Hannes Swoboda, S&D Group President stated: "We are appalled at the witch-hunt against LGBTI people in Uganda. This has nothing to do with supporting or rejecting Western values, but is about respecting fundamental human rights. The EU's development aid commitments to Uganda will not change immediately but we will consider the formal sanctions at our disposal, including visa and travel bans for officials involved with the Anti-Homosexuality Act and launching consultations to suspend the Cotonou trade agreement with countries such as Uganda and Nigeria which adopt homophobic laws. EU development aid should be redirected to ensure that EU money reaches the most vulnerable without government-imposed discrimination. We won't let entire groups be persecuted and jailed simply for who they are; no one's human rights are to be toyed with."

S&D Euro MPs back proposals to improve cross-border police and judicial co-operation

Members in Strasbourg gave the green light to the European Investigation Order, which will help the police of one member state to carry out investigations (interviews of suspects and witnesses, and collection of evidence) in another EU country. They also supported a call for some changes in the functioning of the European Arrest Warrant to improve its efficiency, while protecting the fundamental rights of suspects. S&D Group vice-president responsible for civil liberties Sylvie Guillaume said:

"Today, despite the introduction of the European Arrest Warrant, too many criminals manage to escape justice. Both the investigation order and the arrest warrant seek to improve cross-border law enforcement but we insist that they also fully respect the fundamental rights of the accused."

Prostitution: No more trafficking of women, say S&D Euro MPs

European lawmakers urged EU governments to step up efforts to fight forced prostitution and trafficking of women, in a resolution drafted by S&D Euro MP Mary Honeyball. At least 62% of trafficked women become victims of sexual exploitation according to official data published in April 2013 by the Commission. Many of those victims are from EU countries and many are very young. Prostitution is also connected to organised crime, second only to drug trafficking. The resolution recommends a "change of approach" to crack down on demand – the so-called 'Nordic way' – in order to combat the trafficking of women.

Common European Sales Law for cross-border transactions will be an open up Europe for EU consumers'

EU firms will be able to trade more easily in other member states thanks to a new law voted in the Parliament. The law sets out common rules for cross-border sales to be used as an alternative to national legislation. It introduces a uniform set of EU-wide rules for cross-border sales, to be applied on a voluntary basis. The aim is to boost business in the internal market by overcoming trade barriers resulting from differences in national contract law.

Europe needs to be tougher on organised crime

S&D Euro MPs meeting in Strasbourg backed a new EU law to facilitate freezing and confiscating assets linked to criminal activities across Europe. The new law sets out minimum rules to improve harmonisation between the different systems for freezing and confiscation used by each EU member state. The proceeds of organised crime – from trafficking drugs, human beings, weapons or counterfeit goods – are estimated at several thousand billion euros. The sale of illegal drugs alone represents €100 billion per year. A major part of these illicit profits is laundered and then injected into legal activities, sometimes in different member states.

Aid for Europe's poorest people

Aid has been secured until 2020 after the Parliament approved a deal with the Council on the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived. The fund with a budget of €3.5 billion for the period of 2014-2020 will provide food, basic material assistance and social welfare to the EU's poorest.

S&D Euro MPs lead vote on emergency eCall system in all cars from 2015

S&D Euro MP Olga Sehnalova led a cross-party majority on a proposal to equip from 2015 all new models of passenger cars with an eCall device that is activated in the event of a serious accident anywhere in Europe. This device will automatically dial the 112 emergency number and send details of the accident so that rescue services can be immediately alerted and cut response times.