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European Values for Ukraine

'Only the Spoken word Prevails'
Speech by EPP President Wilfried Martens
Club of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung

14 September 2011, Kiev Hotel Intercontinental

Dear Mr Lange,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends!

I would like to thank you for coming here tonight, and discussing the topic of European values for Ukraine.

It is indeed a perfect moment in time to discuss it, and I am grateful for the opportunity to offer some ideas on it.

Dear friends,

I believe it is no exaggeration to say that this is a crucial point in time: for Ukraine, and for the whole of Europe. Let me put it very bluntly: Ukraine has reached a point where it has to take a fundamental decision: Whether to continue on the path of values essential to European democracy, or else fall back into a status of semi-freedom, and therefore semi-Europeanness.

Twenty years after reaching independence, and with political, economic and societal achievements far exceeding the expectations of 1991, Ukraine today is risking going backwards in its development as a democracy and open society.

The famous Freedom House index of 2010 classified Ukraine, for the first time in many years, as only partially free.

This is a sign of alarm for all of Europe.

As you know, I requested to meet with Yulia Tymoshenko in the jail. But unfortunately my request to visit her has been refused.

You also know I would have much preferred to see her in different circumstances, to say the least.

Like the whole of the European People's Party, I have always considered the trial against her as a politically motivated act of oppression, not worthy of a European democracy.

Our party and myself have repeatedly said that, on the latest occasion in a joint statement with Senator John McCain several weeks ago.

All the foreign ministers of the 27 Member States of the European Union confirmed this position in preparation of the European Neighbourhoodship Summit at the 30th of September in Warsaw.

Yulia Tymoshenko is a trusted friend and her party is an important member of our political family.

But we are talking here about much more than the trial against one person.

We are speaking as well about the trials against other members of the opposition.

We are talking about the future of your country as a European democracy, which means more than just the question of an independent judiciary, based on the rule of law – even though this is the most important aspect.

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It concerns many other aspects of society and the economy, including the electoral law, transparency in the energy sector and the working conditions for small and medium enterprises: Ukraine has one of the worst investment climates in the world, according to OECD statistics.

Healthy and dynamic small and medium enterprises are not only a precondition to sustainable economic growth. Especially for our political family, they are at the heart of a functioning civil society.

Ukraine also has to at least make visible efforts to implement the essentials of the European Energy Community. Too close ties between political institutions and the energy sector, and particularly personal enrichment of individual politicians, are against the spirit if not the letter of that charter.

Last but by no means least, the European Union – and especially the European People's Party – will watch very attentively the new electoral law now being formulated for the parliamentary elections next year.

If Ukraine wants to continue on its European path, this law must respect the basic rules of pluralism, and free, fair and democratic elections.

It will also have to take into account the interests of all parties, as well as civil society.

The manipulation of the electoral law in the interests of one party is equal to a manipulation of the elections themselves.

And of course, like in every democracy, the opposition needs to participate in the elections.

For your country, this means that Yulia Tymoshenko, as the main opposition leader, needs to participate in the 2012 elections as a candidate.

Today I had a meeting with your President. And the messages I just gave to this conference room, are the same as I gave to your President. During this very frank discussion

I said to your President that he has the major responsibility the respect of these fundamental rights.

Dear friends,

I know that in many respects, I am preaching to the converted here tonight.

But I would like to point out these topics because I am speaking to representatives of Ukrainian civil society. You have a role too.

The future of your country is not only in the hands of your government.

It is in the hands of the whole Ukrainian people.

That is why your work is so very important.

And we in the European Union will do what we can to support you in this endeavour.

Let me emphasise how much the European People's Party appreciates the work of foundations like the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in this respect.

And I would like to particularly mention our host, Mr Nico Lange.

We all remember how he was treated by the authorities last summer.

For all of us in the EPP, this episode was the first sign of alarm that things were moving in the wrong direction in the Ukrainian government. But above all, we have seen more proof of Mr Nico Lange's personal commitment to the cause of freedom. Thank you for what you are doing, Mr Lange, and thank you again for inviting me!

Dear friends,

Let me spell it out very clearly: I believe in Ukraine's European destiny.

We all know that at this point in time, it is fruitless to speak about a concrete membership perspective for Ukraine in the European Union.

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But it would be foolish to rule out membership for all times. What we need now is an ever closer relationship between Ukraine and the EU.

That would find its expression in the Association Agreement which is currently being negotiated.

On the whole and as a matter of course, I am absolutely convinced that this agreement is a good idea.

But the EPP heads of state and government and the leadership of the EPP, are asking to stop the political persecution of the opposition, the violation of the rule of law and of the non-respect of democracy.

Concluding an association agreement will ultimately depend on the decisions taken here in Kyiv in the upcoming days and weeks.

That is why it is so important for us to have this debate here tonight.

And, frankly speaking, that is why I came to Ukraine this week: to emphasise the commitment of the European People's Party to a European Ukraine at a truly decisive moment.

I believe talking is better than silence.

But the talk has to be frank and honest.

Differences of opinion have to be openly addressed, in polite but clear language.

And I will continue to raise the same worries about Ukraine's future that I have raised here with you.

Dear friends,

Let me conclude with one of the great sons of Ukraine, Taras Shevchenko, in the unforgettable finale of his poem 'Testament':

"And in the great new family,
The family of the free,
With softly spoken, kindly word
Remember also me."

I can speak for all of the European Union when I say: More than for any other reason, it is for your love of freedom, so vividly expressed in these lines that Ukraine and its people are in our hearts.

Taras Shevchenko ends his poem with the theme of freedom.

You, my dear friends, are part of the next generation of Ukrainian leaders.

I am deeply convinced that we can, together, begin a new narrative for Ukraine in Europe today, and I know – and you know - it will begin with freedom.

Thank you for your attention!