

Speech: The Need for Free and Fair Elections in DRC

Thank you Mr President.

Let me begin by welcoming the presence today of the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Okitundu, and thank you also to SRSZ Zerrougui for updating us on the intensifying instability, and the dire humanitarian consequences, in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The United Kingdom is deeply concerned by the proliferation of violence in the DRC, particularly in North and South Kivu, Tanganyika, Ituri and the Kasai and at significant increases in human rights abuses, with 744 violations in January, 60% of which were perpetrated by state agents.

As is too often the case, and as the civilian population of the DRC know all too well, the result of this instability has been devastating. 4.5 million Congolese have now fled their homes and communities; there are more internally displaced people in the DRC than anywhere else in Africa. 40,000 people have fled from Ituri to Uganda in this year alone, bringing the refugee population up to 670,000. This has caused a devastating humanitarian crisis – over 13.1 million are in need of humanitarian assistance and protection. This number has doubled since 2017.

Mr President,

There is clearly a link between the ongoing political uncertainty and the increasing insecurity. The Congolese people cannot express their legitimate concerns with the political situation without risking their lives. On 21 January and 25 February, security forces once again violently repressed demonstrations leaving at least 9 people dead, dozens wounded and hundreds arrested. This must stop.

The holding of credible and constitutional elections by 23 December this year leading to a democratic and peaceful transition of power is essential to ending the political crisis. Without this, there is a significant risk of further violence destabilising not just the DRC, but the wider region also.

We welcome the progress made towards elections so far, including the completion of voter registration, the passing of electoral laws and the announcement of an electoral budget. However, this is no time for complacency. There is much more to do.

It is essential that the election calendar is honoured and that key dates set out in the electoral timetable are met, including the completion of the Voter Register List by 5 April, the Audit for the electoral list by 25 May, convocation of the electoral process in June and registration of Presidential candidates in July.

But, Mr President, holding credible elections is about more than complying

with timelines, it is also about creating the conditions than enable free and fair elections to take place. In order to do this, we call on the Government to implement the 31 December Agreement in full, including full implementation of the confidence-building measures set out in this agreement.

The Government must also respect the fundamental rights and freedoms of the people of the DRC, opening political space and allowing peaceful demonstrations and freedom of expression. The UK is extremely concerned at the high numbers of violations of political rights and fundamental freedoms in January. And we were appalled by the disproportionate use of force against churchgoers and peaceful protesters on 31 December 2017, 21 January 2018, and 25 February 2018 and the subsequent loss of life.

We recognise that the onus is not only on the Government to deliver credible elections and in this context we call on the opposition to engage constructively in the process on the basis of the 31 December Agreement, which will demonstrate their credibility and potential to govern.

Mr President,

MONUSCO has a crucial role to play in this crucial year in the DRC in protecting civilians and supporting the implementation of the 31 December Agreement.

We welcome the efforts to improve MONUSCO's ability to carry out these tasks more efficiently and more effectively. In particular we welcome efforts to enhance the flexibility and mobility of MONUSCO's forces and to improve their performance. It is important that these reforms are implemented swiftly.

Mr President,

In conclusion, let me be clear: the violence and resulting dire humanitarian situation in the DRC are the result of continual disappointment of the people in the political process and the political leaders responsible for this process. The only way to avert further violence is for free and fair elections to take place in December and for the 31 December Agreement to be fully implemented. Further excuses and delays will only lead to more violence and despair. The Security Council cannot allow this to happen. The people of the Democratic Republic of Congo cannot afford to wait any longer.

Tackling terrorism: local leaders welcome EU plans to invest in cities to protect communities

The President of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) has welcomed a

European Union plan to provide funding to build urban defences against terrorist attacks, stressing the role of local authorities in both the prevention and fight against violent radicalisation. Speaking in Brussels, he said that strengthening public protection must go hand-in-hand with tackling social exclusion and warned that proposals to cut EU cohesion policy would therefore undermine these efforts.

President Lambertz was speaking during a conference, '[Building urban defences against terrorism: lessons learned from recent attacks](#)', that took place just 300 metres from the site of one of the terrorist attacks in Brussels on 22 March 2016, the Maalbeek metro station in the heart of the Belgian capital's EU quarter. The conference is one element of the EU's effort to put in place counter-terrorism measures, which includes an initiative to increase the protection of public spaces [launched at the end](#) of last year, led by **Julian King**, the European Commissioner for the Security Union.

[Karl-Heinz Lambertz](#) (BE/PES), the President of the EU's assembly of local and regional politicians, welcomed the decision by the European Commission to dedicate specific measures and EU funds for cities to increase protection of public spaces against terrorism. "Community safety is a priority and, by bringing together every level of government, the EU is taking the right steps to counter terrorism," he said. "We need to cooperate across borders, invest locally to promote social cohesion and ensure that our security services are ready to prevent future attacks. This work starts in our communities."

The fund for cities was promoted by the European Commission at the conference, which was co-organised with and hosted by the CoR. Commissioner King, **Dimitris Avramopoulos**, European Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship, **Corina Crețu**, European Commissioner for Regional Policy, as well as French Interior Minister **Gérard Collomb** also took the floor.

President Lambertz said: "It is welcome that the EU is taking action by working together with our cities to protect our streets. Nevertheless, if we want to prevent future tragedies we need to tackle the root causes of radicalism: social exclusion and a lack of community integration. Cutting EU cohesion policy or diverting precious EU funds away from local authorities' pockets would be dangerous and counterproductive. Cohesion policy is not a cash cow, or a cow to be slaughtered to feed other objectives. It is about investing in shared local problems that need European solutions."

Corina Crețu, the European Commissioner for Regional Policy, also addressed the conference. "There is far more to security than security measures," she said. "Security in our cities has a social dimension: access to quality basic services such as education and healthcare, urban regeneration, community empowerment. Also, I truly believe that solutions will be found by working together at all levels, local, national and European, by exchanging experience and good ideas, and by making our cities truly more inclusive in order to tackle extremism and violence before they take roots in our streets."

[Bart Somers](#) (BE/ALDE), Mayor of Mechelen, winner of the World Mayors Prize in 2017 for his work on social integration, and the CoR's rapporteur on [counter-radicalisation](#) efforts, said: "To counter radicalisation, our Committee advocates a strong line on respecting the rule of law. But local and regional governments also deeply believe in the importance of integration and of upholding fundamental European values. Extremists share a common trait – a sense of alienation. While many others who face social exclusion never become terrorists, they often express their alienation in other ways that harm society, such as rejecting shared values of democracy and the rule of law. A lack of integration is bad for society and potentially dangerous, which is why the EU must act together to invest in social infrastructure."

The CoR is currently drafting a response to the European Commission's action plan to reduce the vulnerability of public spaces. The CoR's rapporteur, [Jean-François Barnier](#) (FR/ALDE), mayor of Chambon-Feugerolles, said: "In its action plan, the European Commission recognises that we need cooperation between local, regional, national and European authorities to protect public spaces better. That is very welcome. The plan is an invitation to politicians and officials to learn from each other. I believe the plan will not just help reduce the number of terrorist attacks, but will also help to prevent radicalisation and promote more inclusive communities."

In a joint statement, the European Committee of the Regions and European Commission welcomed the initiative of EU local leaders to work together to share knowledge, increase cooperation and to improve security of their public spaces. The statement complements a declaration adopted in [Nice](#) in September 2017.

Speakers at the conference included the mayors of Nice, **Christian Estrosi**, and of Manchester, **Andrew Burnham**. Both cities have been the targets of major attacks in the past two years.

Notes to editors:

- The conference on 'Building urban defences against terrorism: lessons learned from recent attacks' was organised by the European Commission and hosted by the European Committee of the Regions. Over 100 local and regional politicians and municipal officials attended, with speakers from Barcelona, Berlin, London, Nice, Manchester, Marseille, and Stockholm and – from the United States – New York.
- The European Committee of the Regions adopted proposals for counter-radicalisation efforts at the local and regional level in June 2016. The opinion – entitled "[Combatting Radicalisation and Violent Extremism: Prevention mechanisms at local and regional level](#)" – was drafted by Bart Somers (BE/ALDE). The CoR decided to present proposals two days after the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015.
- The CoR is currently drafting recommendations for an "[Action Plan to support the protection of public spaces](#)" drawn up by the European

Commission. The opinion, whose rapporteur is Jean-François Barnier (FR/ALDE), will be adopted in July 2018.

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[Joint operation against drug trafficking in Finland and the Netherlands](#)

The Hague, 8 March 2018

Since October 2017, Eurojust has been supporting the Finnish authorities in one of the largest investigations of drug trafficking in Finland, and especially in the region of Pirkanmaa, from which most of the Finnish suspects originate.

A larger organised crime group (OCG) established both in Finland and the Netherlands, which has been trafficking drugs, mainly amphetamine, in those countries, was dismantled by the Finnish and Dutch authorities. The estimated value of the drugs (approximately 50 kg) amounts to EUR 2.8 million.

Eurojust facilitated the simultaneous execution of European Investigation Orders and [European Arrest Warrants](#) and assisted in the development of coordinated strategies for the joint operations of the Finnish, Dutch, German and Swedish national authorities, which were facilitated through a [coordination centre](#) established at Eurojust. Without Eurojust's intervention, cross-border actions would have been very difficult to perform.

The German and Swedish national authorities supported the Finnish authorities' investigation and cooperated on the basis of mutual legal assistance requests. In the Netherlands, suspects were arrested and house searches were conducted by the International Legal Assistance Centre (IRC) of Limburg. During these actions, important evidence was obtained for the Finnish authorities. Through the close and active cooperation of the national authorities with Eurojust and Europol, 19 members of the OCG were detained in Finland. A total of 37 individuals (23 in Finland, 14 in the Netherlands) are suspected of five aggravated drug offences.

In addition to drug trafficking, the investigation focused on seven suspected

money laundering offences related to the trafficking of drugs between Finland and the Netherlands.

The National Member for Finland at Eurojust, Piia Vottonen, stated: *'The active cooperation between Eurojust and the national authorities at the Eurojust coordination centre enabled the success in the case. Eurojust dealt with the judicial aspects within its competence, organised a coordination meeting to discuss the details of the case and set up a coordination centre to support the coordinated actions.'*

Our core task at Eurojust is to assist judicial authorities in dealing with cross-border criminal cases. In this case, as in so many others, the Finnish authorities took on-the-spot investigative measures during the action day at the coordination centre, which provided the necessary judicial support to the investigation.'

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[Remarks by President Donald Tusk after his meeting with Taoiseach Leo Varadkar](#)

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Go raibh maith agat, Taoiseach. I heard that the last days were particularly difficult in Ireland because of the severe weather, particularly for people in the countryside. But let me reassure you that I have not come here to chill the air, but rather to warm it up. I may be from the East, but I am *not* a Beast.

I have come to Dublin to consult with the Taoiseach and discuss Ireland's

concerns on several important issues ahead of the European Council in two weeks. The European Union is a family of free nations, linked by values. For sure, we may not always be in agreement on everything. But in times of trouble, families come together and stand with each other. For the EU27, this is especially true when we talk about Brexit.

In December, also with the active participation of the Taoiseach, we addressed the most difficult issues resulting from the UK's departure in 2019. Without the progress achieved in December, moving to the second phase of negotiations would not have been possible. But we also have to be clear that any backsliding on the commitments made so far would create a risk to further progress in Brexit negotiations. This applies also to the question of avoiding a hard border.

When I was in London last week, I heard very critical comments by Prime Minister May, and others, about the way the Irish border issue was presented in the draft Withdrawal Agreement.

We know today that the UK government rejects: "a customs and regulatory border down the Irish Sea"; the EU Single Market and the customs union. While we must respect this position, we also expect the UK to propose a specific and realistic solution to avoid a hard border. As long as the UK doesn't present such a solution, it is very difficult to imagine substantive progress in Brexit negotiations. If in London someone assumes that the negotiations will deal with other issues first, before moving to the Irish issue, my response would be: Ireland first.

Next month marks the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, ratified by large majorities North and South of the border. We must recognise the democratic decision taken by Britain to leave the EU in 2016, just as we must recognise the democratic decision made on the island of Ireland in 1998 with all its consequences. The risk of destabilising the fragile peace process must be avoided at all costs. So we will be firm on this.

Yesterday in Luxembourg, I presented my draft guidelines to shape our future relationship with the UK after Brexit. Also yesterday, the UK Chancellor made a speech, in the City of London, arguing for a bespoke deal or an ambitious FTA covering financial services. So let me refer to this issue of such great interest to London.

In the FTA we can offer trade in goods, with the aim of covering all sectors, subject to zero tariffs and no quantitative restrictions. But services are not about tariffs. Services are about common rules, common supervision, and common enforcement. To ensure a level playing field. To ensure the integrity of the Single Market. And ultimately also to ensure financial stability. This is why we cannot offer the same in services as we can offer in goods. And it's also why FTAs don't have detailed rules for financial services. We should all be clear that also when it comes to financial services, life will be different after Brexit.

I also heard the Chancellor's words about financial services being "very much in the mutual interest" of the UK and EU. I fully respect the Chancellor's

competence in defining what's in the UK's interest. I would, however, ask to allow us to define what's in the EU's interest.

Finally, let me add that during my visit in Luxembourg yesterday, I experienced what European solidarity with Ireland means. As you know, every country has its own problems resulting from Brexit. So does Luxembourg. But one of the first issues raised by Prime Minister Bettel in our conversation, was the issue of our common position regarding Ireland. Since my last visit here in Dublin, I have spoken to virtually every EU leader, and every one of them – without exception – declared, just like Prime Minister Bettel did yesterday, that among their priorities are: protecting the peace process, and avoiding a hard border. The EU stands by Ireland. This is a matter between the EU27 and UK, not Ireland and the UK. Thank you.

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