

Speech by Foreign Minister George Papandreou at the High-Level Conference on Drugs entitled: "Towards an effective drug policy: Scientific documentation, everyday action and political choices"

Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Apostolou, it is a great pleasure to be here today to welcome you. I believe that in the Presidency's diplomatic marathon, we should definitely make a stop here in Athens for this conference. I should stress that as the EU Presidency, we are the voice not only of the "15" but also of the 28 countries (plus ten, plus three) of the EU, the future EU, when we endeavour, struggle and exhaust all diplomatic means to resolve a crisis such as the one with Iraq.

Today, the discussion is about this conference, about efforts to find effective methods and policies vis-a-vis a complex social problem, namely the drug problem.

So, I welcome you all, including the representatives of the new countries who honour us with their presence. It is of course with great pleasure that we request their active cooperation in formulating EU policy on the narcotics issue.

In particular the 10 new countries which, after signing the Accession Treaty on April 16, will be participating as observers in all processes within the EU Council.

Why did the Greek Presidency take this initiative? I believe we all feel that something is wrong with our policy. At the same time, there have been some developments: The EU recently announced the mid-term review of the five-year Action Plan 2000-2004, the UN will be discussing its own mid-term review of its Action Plan 1998-2008 at the meeting of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs in Vienna in April. Our intention is to contribute, through this meeting, to the abovementioned efforts and also to assist the next three Presidencies - the Italian, Irish and the Dutch - that is, until the conclusion of the current EU Action Plan, so that we might reach specific conclusions and - I dare say - more effective ones, to facilitate the steps we will be taking subsequently.

In addition, the French Foreign Ministry is organising a conference on drug trafficking in Central Asia on 21 and 22 May. We are in close cooperation with the French Ministry and the conclusions of this conference will provide important food for thought for the conference in France.

I know that many representatives from the UN and other countries and regions not only of central Asia, but also Latin America, will be present in France.

There are certain key issues which we would like to raise, as Mr. Apostolou said, at this conference. First of all, how can we reduce demand, how can we limit the use of narcotic substances, particularly among youth. A second issue involves reducing the health hazard. If drug use cannot be minimised, we can at least reduce the damage to health and prevent the marginalisation of former or current drug users, even those who are still dependent. And thirdly of course, the issue of reducing the supply, trafficking and sale of illegal substances in a way that strikes a real blow against organised crime and criminal circles, illegal profit, the enormous economic strength that is created, the political strength that is created, the links between organised crime in the area of drug trafficking and other forms of organised crime, for instance trafficking in humans and arms, as well as terrorism.

However, we must be honest with ourselves. When the proposal was made to jointly organise this event with the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, along with the Ministry of Health and Welfare, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Public Order, and I would like to thank all my colleagues and the bodies participating in this event today...

...As I was saying, when this proposal was made, the EU Presidency not only immediately embraced the idea but made it a priority. And I think it is quite correct that our objective here in Athens is open, sincere dialogue and an exchange of views. Naturally, there are many different points of view, and very often quite strong clashes on these issues.

Through this conflict of views, we hope to be able to formulate more specific proposals, which will help shape a single European policy. These proposals will also facilitate cooperation among all the EU Member States, the European Commission, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, EUROPOL, the European Parliament and other non-EU bodies such as the Council of Europe and the UN.

In Greece also, there is a strong dialogue on this issue and many of us have openly come out in favour of one or the other viewpoint. I do not hide that I personally have from time to time supported the need to see the addict as someone in need of treatment rather than a criminal, the need to make full use of the conclusions of a number of bold pilot projects, regarding the supervised administration of substitute narcotics in an organised way, including by the State itself.

We should differentiate the way we deal with different substances and in this respect I would like to share with you my experience at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Seeing many hotbeds of crisis, in many regions including our own here in the Balkans, and also recently in Afghanistan, the fear that if drug trafficking is left in the hands of criminal circles - this fear we all see - which I have seen in my experience - I feel that we will gradually be creating a terrible monster.

We will be allowing a terrible monster to grow, a monster of lawlessness, which will not only continue to spread the use of drugs in our society but will do so with greater determination and, I would say, with greater ingenuity. At the same time, it will increasingly undermine legality and even our democratic institutions. It will contribute to the spread of corruption and the control of important sectors of economic life.

This means that the drug problem impinges not only on matters relating to the health of a person in need of treatment, but also on crucial political aspects of our society. It impinges on our democratic institutions, and it is certain that tackling the problem solely in the context of criminality and policing is no longer enough.

I believe that this is now generally accepted, but of course, there are many and differing views on what this means in practice.

When we see on the one hand that we are unable to control drug trafficking in our own prisons, or for example, in Afghanistan, after the change and I would say liberation from the Taliban regime, we see that the income from drug production is equal to the entire international assistance we have provided to Afghanistan as the international community.

So we should not expect that programmes such as cultivation changes in Afghanistan - to take an example - will solve the problem as simply as that, nor that more policing measures will bring an end to the drug problem.

This is of interest to us here in the Balkans in particular, because unfortunately in this region too, where we have crises, where we have had wars, where many countries are experiencing great difficulties in achieving economic growth, despite the substantial progress made in recent years in the direction of peace and stability, the drug problem has taken on enormous dimensions also here in Southeast Europe. This is why we have developed specific programmes together with the neighbouring Balkan countries, in order to strive for the prosperity and welfare of our citizens. We have also undertaken a specific initiative. An initial action plan for the Balkans has already been submitted and is being discussed by the Horizontal Drugs Group.

The Ministry of Public Order recently held a successful conference on heroin trafficking routes in the Balkans. We would like to ask for your comments and proposals with regard to this plan.

Concluding, I would like to underline that everyone is of course entitled to their personal opinion, and to be honest I have my own opinion. But quite clearly, as the Presidency, not only do we not wish to impose a view, but cannot and should not. What we want from this conference is to encourage dialogue and I hope that my introduction will contribute to the attainment of this objective. We want to generate different opinions, so that we can synthesise views and become, as the EU, more effective in this area.

We also want to combine political opinions, but opinions which are documented, based on research, on scientific experience and on political efforts that have been made in Europe and elsewhere, so that we politicians can be better informed and more effective in taking decisions not only in our national parliaments but also in European institutions.

Thus, the contribution of researchers, scientists and those agencies that work in a specific way in areas relating to narcotics is not only valuable but indispensable to this dialogue, so that we can shed light on this very substantial public debate in our societies, so that we may educate ourselves, as politicians, as well as our citizens and thus be able to take decisions more effectively.

I therefore wish to thank you for devoting time to come to Athens and participate in this meeting. I would also like to thank all the organisers, as well as Mr. Apostolou, Mrs. Kokkevi, Mrs. Maliori, Mrs. Spineli and many others whose names I may not remember.

I wish you success. We await your conclusions with great interest.

I would like to stress that other Ministers will be here to speak. I already see former Ministers in the area of Health here. I would like to welcome them also. This shows how great the interest is in Greece - and I am sure throughout Europe too - in this discussion.

Thank you very much. I wish you success.