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OPENING SPEECH ON BEHALF OF EUROSTAT

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The Eastern Partnership – an initiative launched by Poland and Sweden – should contribute to the development of stability, better governance and economic development at the Eastern borders of the European Union and aims at building an increasingly closer relationship with all European countries. It is an important initiative for the European Union and for the European statisticians in particular, the proof of which is the organisation of this Conference.

Eurostat is actively involved in and highly encourages cooperation with our colleagues in the national statistical institutes of the countries covered by the Eastern Partnership. The main aim of this cooperation is harmonisation of statistical methods and data with European standards but also support to institution building and infrastructure development in statistics.

One of our flagship initiatives is the organisation of annual High-Level Seminars for 11 countries from Eastern European and Central Asian countries during which topical issues relevant for the top management of the national statistical institutes are discussed. It is a forum at which the participating countries can exchange their opinions and ideas on the improvement of their respective statistical system. The topic of the 2010 seminar was the coordination of the national statistical system while this year the participants discussed various aspects of the quality in statistics. The EU member states, the Commission/Eurostat, EFTA and UN/ECE also contribute with their experience to those seminars.

Both topics that were dealt with at those seminars are of crucial importance. Coordination was stressed in the ESGAB report and is one of those issues that are considered for the envisaged revision of Regulation (322) on the ESS.

Sponsorship on quality deals with the common ESS quality assurance framework and the alignment with the ESCB quality management.

Eurostat is also implementing – with the support of EFTA and UN/ECE – a project on Adapted Global Assessments of the statistical systems in these countries. These assessments cover all institutional aspects of a statistical system, the cooperation with other authorities and the coordination role of the NSI but also a number of statistical areas. The European Statistics Code of Practice and its principles are the basis of these assessments as well as international and European standards for the production of statistical information. The outcome of such an

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assessment is a report containing a number of recommendations for improvements for institutional aspects (e.g. the independence of the statistical office, quality management, the confidentiality principle, the websites and dissemination of statistics and others) but also for statistical production processes and outputs. These recommendations will help the partner countries to improve and come closer to the principles enshrined in the European Statistics Code of Practice and to European standards. Assessments were already done for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, one assessment is ongoing for Ukraine and others will be implemented in Moldova, Belarus, Tadjikistan and possibly Georgia in 2012.

It has to be mentioned that this is not a one-off exercise: the CoP is a living tool, which has been recently amended. Some principles, especially professional independence, should become even legally binding.

Other cooperation activities include short-term technical assistance missions, seminars on subject matter areas and Twinning projects. Currently, Twinning projects in statistics are implemented in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine and other countries consider applying for it. Eurostat also takes note and encourages bilateral cooperation between the Member States and Norway and individual countries in the region. There are good examples of such cooperation, like the involvement of Statistics Sweden (SIDA) in the development of the national statistical system in Georgia or the technical assistance provided by Statistics Norway to the Moldovan NSI.

Eurostat actively participates in the process of negotiation of the Association Agreements which are held at present individually with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Each Association Agreement contains a chapter on statistics which specifies the basis, the areas and the ways and means of the cooperation in statistics. For all the countries the chapter on statistics is provisionally closed but this is only the beginning of a closer cooperation with the aim to come closer to the European statistical system and its members.

I briefly mentioned all those activities and forms of cooperation, because I believe that this Conference is a competent forum to discuss in detail further cooperation in the framework of Eastern Partnership. We have a unique opportunity to discuss the far reaching visions, intermediate objectives and short-term goals related to the cooperation with the region and in the region. We can share our ideas about the best ways of working together and the results we would like to achieve in the foreseeable future.

We are all aware that in addition to the capacity building of the national statistical systems needed to face the challenges of the modern societies, to strengthen trade ties and to support the sustainable economic growth, especially at the time of global financial crisis, statistics has an important role to play in all areas of social, political and economic life. It supports the aspiration of deepening democracy and establishing a civil society. It is the backbone of several sectoral policies. We are witnessing that the needs for European Statistics (ES) are constantly increasing and their nature is changing as they are massively used for

EU policy making. Their importance and volume are growing, and they are becoming increasingly complex. EU policy is addressing more complicated issues than in the past and also European governance is changing. There is currently much more interest on the side of politicians in statistics which makes us proud of our work on the one hand, but on the other there are also some problems and challenges linked to that.

Moreover, some statistics are directly used for regulatory or administrative purposes and this specific usage has important implications for quality of statistics/indicators.

More and more we have to bear in mind that quality of official statistics is not an absolute feature to be dealt with in a stand-alone manner. Instead, it is relative, defined by the users' needs, and multifaceted, and thus should be dealt with in a context and in an integrated manner.

We as official statisticians are not very much at ease with the consequences of these new developments. The new challenges linked to proximity of ES to politics and to their high visibility raise concerns regarding our independence and credibility. Statistics are an important tool for policy makers, businesses, scientists and the general public. Users need to be well informed and aware of the strengths and the weaknesses of statistics they use. This is not an easy and straightforward task, as we have to explain not our compliance with quality standards, but also the actual standards themselves. These are not set in stone and they need to be continuously refined in order to reflect new developments in statistics and in our societies.

I hope that during this Conference we will create ideas to bring about closer regional cooperation and further integration of statistical activities in the region, to further strengthen the national statistical systems and to intensify the contacts between the region and the key international players in statistics. In the margins, we can also brainstorm on a full-fledged implementation of the fit-for-purpose paradigm for official statistics.

