

THE STATE OF THE UNION

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KEYNOTE LECTURE – LAURA BOLDRINI

EMBARGOED UNTIL 17:00, 9/05/13

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Mr. President, authorities, ladies and gentlemen,

As I speak, rescue workers and volunteers are busy digging through the rubble in Dacca, searching for the bodies of those still missing after the factory they were working in collapsed just over two weeks ago. The hundreds of workers who were in the building at the time, over seven hundred of whom have lost their lives - and the many millions like them in Bangladesh and elsewhere – worked long hours in dangerous conditions for the equivalent of a few dozen euro a month. Bangladesh must, of course, do more to ensure adequate working conditions and better wages, but the primary responsibility for what happened in Dacca – and for the countless other such incidents in sweatshops around the world – lies with us. The ‘Rana Plaza’ workers produced garments for Western firms, many of which were European. Their ‘slave labour’, as Pope Francis has so aptly described it, was and is the result of Western – and European – companies’ unbridled quest for profits. It was also the result of a tendency, on the part of private enterprises worldwide, to flee from countries where labour laws and government enforcement protect workers. And our governments have, so far, been unable to stem this tide – or have responded to it by dismantling safeguards for workers in their own countries. Are we – is Europe – relinquishing its role at the forefront of the global battle for rights?

The European Union has signalled that it may consider trade actions against Bangladesh, limiting or eliminating the preferential access to EU markets for its garments. This is a step in the right direction, but does little to address the root causes of the problem. Some of the firms whose clothes were produced in the 'Rana Plaza' factory have stepped forward to offer compensation to the victims and their families. To ensure public awareness and a culture of responsibility, public opinion needs to be well-informed. This is the part played by the robust, independent and pluralistic media we need to foster. The companies which have taken these steps were responding to effective media coverage at home. Too few major European exporters – including in Italy - have signed up to international initiatives geared at ensuring fair working conditions worldwide.

For decades Europe drove the process which led to the consolidation of fundamental rights in international law. We led the battle worldwide to ensure that rights be recognised, not granted. We enshrined the right to work in our Constitutions, establishing the 'Social Europe' on which the European project is founded. We strove to enforce what one of Italy's most well-known theorists on the subject, Stefano Rodotà, has called 'the right to have rights'. And Europe – the European project – was a powerful magnet, attracting other countries which were lured by the idea of a space of freedom, common values and shared prosperity.

Is the European project still so appealing? Yes, the EU has integrated human rights into its foreign policy. Yes, the EU is leading the global battle for a moratorium on the death penalty. Yes, the Union now has a Fundamental Rights Agency. Yes, the EU is a model for states elsewhere in the world – in East and West Africa, for instance - which wish to create areas where people and goods can circulate freely. And yes, the possibility of accession to the European Union can still contribute to getting old enemies to sit around the same table and to strike deals which would not

have been possible a few years ago, as the recent agreement between Serbia and Kosovo shows.

In other ways, however, Europe has chosen to forego its leading role in the protection of fundamental rights. Efforts to secure Europe's borders have led some member states – including my own – to fail to respect international law by sending refugees back to countries where they were at risk of torture or inhuman or degrading treatment, or where they could have been returned to the states where they faced persecution. On some occasions, member states have signed readmission agreements with third countries which have not been subjected to parliamentary ratification – and scrutiny – and where human rights clauses are either inexistent or weak. For too long, our attention towards the southern shores of the Mediterranean – our common sea, the *Mare Nostrum* – has focused almost exclusively on migration control, despite our knowledge, as Europeans, that mobility helps drive growth. Now, in the wake of the Arab Spring, Europe could and should play a greater role in supporting and strengthening the new democracies in the region.

Across Europe, and particularly in countries which have traditionally been staunchly pro-European, anti-European feelings are growing. A poll published yesterday by an Italian daily shows that, for the first time, a majority of Italians – 53% - now view EU membership in negative terms. As 'Europe' becomes synonymous with 'austerity', as the recession deepens across most of the continent, unemployment spirals and families struggle to make ends meet, nationalist, inward-looking sentiments are replacing the ideals Europe's founding fathers fought for. Solidarity, one of the founding principles of the European project, is being replaced by petty, vengeful attitudes which divide Europe instead of uniting it, pitting allegedly spendthrift members against tidy book-keepers. Extremist forces whose statements and actions often have explicit neo-Nazi overtones are now represented

in a number of national parliaments. Racist gangs roam the streets of some European countries, harassing and attacking migrants and refugees. Freedom of speech and the freedom of the media are being curtailed in other parts of Europe.

How can we reconnect Europe with its citizens? How can we ensure that Europe regains its rightful place as a model for the rest of the world? I believe we need to return to and uphold the values and principles on which Europe was founded. We need to reinforce, not undermine, the European social model, with its emphasis on protecting – not discarding - those in need, and on safeguarding workers' rights. Southern Europe – my country, Italy, as well as Greece, Spain and Portugal – needs more, not less, welfare to counter the effects of the crisis and to enable people to get back on their feet and forge a better future for themselves, for their countries and for Europe as a whole. We need more, not less, solidarity between and within states, and more solidarity between generations. We need labour reforms which combat job insecurity, rather than furthering it. We need to take stock of the effect of austerity measures and heed the calls for changes in policy before it is too late. If we do not take these steps, Europe's social cohesion is at risk – and our youth may come to be known, in the future, as Europe's 'lost generation'.

We need to involve parliaments – national parliaments and the European parliament – more in the European decision-making process, ensuring that economic and monetary policies approved in Brussels are discussed by elected representatives. Article 13 of the Fiscal Compact is a first step in this direction, but more needs to be done. We need to strengthen institutions in member states. The processes and deliberations of elected institutions, like parliaments, must become more transparent. And we must ensure that independent bodies tasked with monitoring and upholding human rights exist in all EU countries. Some say that

strengthening rights is not a priority when times are hard. I believe that the opposite holds true – that more rights, as Amartya Sen has so forcefully argued, lead to a greater sense of participation in and ownership over political processes, and - as the history of Europe over the last decades has demonstrated – to greater prosperity.

We need to ensure that EU members which violate fundamental rights, or which undermine the values Europe has enshrined in the Treaty on European Union, face swift, strong action in much the same way as states whose budget deficits are not in line with provisions in the Maastricht Treaty are systematically subjected to procedures which aim to ensure their respect for those provisions. We need the European Union to subject its members – and not just accession or candidate countries – to the same scrutiny as regards respect for fundamental rights and freedoms which it reserves for countries' economic and financial performance indexes. We have the tools for this – article 7 of the Treaty on European Union. We only need to ensure that we use these tools to defend those fundamental rights – and the European project as a whole.

2013 is the European Year of Citizens. Let us ensure that Europe's citizens all have equal access to the rights they possess, that public opinion is swayed by facts, not fiction, and that it is able to mobilise to demand respect for those rights – in Europe and elsewhere.

Shortly before he died, my fellow countryman, the great multilingual novelist Antonio Tabucchi wrote about this “strange European Union, where book-keeping takes precedence over human rights”. I hope that his prophecy never comes true. Mr. President, authorities, ladies and gentlemen, we need more, not less rights. We need more, not less Europe.