



Luxembourg, 14 April 2014
140414/01

R E M A R K S

by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on arrival at the Foreign Affairs Council

"Good morning!

Today's Foreign Affairs Council will begin with a discussion about the situation in Syria, ongoing concerns for the poor people and the humanitarian crisis there, and the ongoing support for Lakhdar Brahimi and his attempts to try to move things forward. And the Member States will also want to discuss about the latest situation in terms of the removal of the chemical weapons.

I think the situation in Syria is absolutely appalling and every time we see the reports of the violence it is terrible and impossible to contemplate anything other than trying to push forward in finding a political settlement to this. I have been saying for three years we need to find a political way through this crisis. Lakhdar Brahimi has a very important role and while he is prepared to do that, we have to support him in everything he is seeking to achieve. And, you know, we just keep saying this not only to those who may share our views, but more importantly perhaps to those who don't.

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We will also talk about Bosnia and Herzegovina. I was recently there, we've been looking at the short and the medium term priorities; the kind of work that we can do to try and support especially young people in that country who are looking increasingly for greater economic support. Unemployment rates are above 50% for young people, as I was told by many members of civil society. We are looking at a kind of Compact for Growth and Jobs as well as ongoing efforts to move the country forward in its European perspective.

It is important that BiH implements the Sejdić-Finci ruling for the reasons that you know very well. It remains an important issue, but from my perspective it has always been about trying to get Bosnia and Herzegovina to tackle a whole range of issues at the same time, of which Constitutional reform and the Sejdić-Finci ruling is part. So, yes it is very important, but in the discussions that we have been having, we have been talking about the broader concepts, of a Compact for Jobs and Growth, how do we support the economy and how do we move this country forward.

But of course the main part of our discussions this afternoon will be on the situation in Ukraine. First of all, our growing concern about what Russia is doing, the reports coming out of the unrest in the Eastern part of Ukraine, trying to call for calm, trying to make sure that people can use democratic means to talk about the future of their country as we look to the presidential elections and beyond. We've seen the reports coming out of Ukraine of what the President is saying on the basis of looking at ways of engaging the East and engaging on the possibility of some kind of referendum. But we have to explore further with them what exactly they mean.

We are of course also looking at the meeting in Geneva on Thursday which I will attend on behalf of the European Union.

We have been in touch with Foreign Minister Lavrov two days ago to talk about this meeting and of course I am in touch with the United States and the Ukraine.

That meeting's purpose is to begin the conversation about how do we de-escalate the situation in Ukraine and how do we ensure that a sovereign state can go forward in the best interest of all of its people. It's absolutely vital that we find a suitable way through this, that is going to bring peace and stability to the whole country.

And that would be the objective of that meeting and I will be looking for endorsement from Foreign Ministers, if you like a mandate from all foreign ministers.

We will also touch on energy, an increasingly important issue, and we will be joined by Commissioner Oettinger for that part of the conversation.

And let me just say a word about Egypt. I am very pleased that the European Union is sending an electoral observation mission for the elections and I agreed that with Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy while I was there. I was only able to see one candidate because logistical reasons prevented me from doing any more than that, but I did spend some hours with Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi and talked with him. My big message to Egypt is and always was

the same: this is a strong partnership; we want the people of Egypt to move forward, we do want these elections to herald the beginning of the next phase of life in Egypt.

But we are growing in our concern for what is happening in some aspects of Egypt and particularly and not surprisingly, I've focused on the death penalty that was handed out to over 500 people. Every interlocutor was at pains to say to me that this is not what they wanted to see and that it does not mean that this will happen. However we also pointed out in return that it sends out very negative signals. And we talked about journalists and other activists that are being held.

I hope that the next phase of life in Egypt is going to be very positive and it is very good for me to have the honour of meeting people across the spectrum.

Thanks, everyone!"



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by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton

following the Foreign Affairs Council

"We have had a long and very important Council meeting which began with discussion about the situation in Syria which I can only describe as appalling. We of course continue to support the efforts of Lakhdar Brahimi as he seeks to try moving forward in the political process. And we will continue in our diplomatic outreach on Syria, to ensure that all our partners remain engaged. We also want to insist that Security Council Resolution 2139 on humanitarian access should be fully implemented. This is part of the discussion that I have been having, as colleagues would know, in Egypt over the last few days as well.

We believe it is up to the regime to ensure tangible and long-lasting improvements in that situation, especially on humanitarian aid. We want to ensure that the deadline for destruction of chemical weapons is kept to the 30th of June. This is of extreme importance. And we also recognise the importance of support for the neighbours of Syria. We want to help them as they manage, looking after refugees, and will continue with our aim in giving support to those countries as well as to the internally displaced people in Syria.

We also discussed the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the socio-economic as well as political challenges they are facing. The first responsibility to deal with them lies with the leadership of the country and we call upon them to provide concrete and quick answers to the legitimate concerns and aspirations of the people. Ahead of October elections, more, not less, needs to be done.

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In the short term it is important for the institutions and leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina to focus on a number of key priorities, particularly socio-economic issues and especially high unemployment among young people. We are ready to support the efforts they make through a number of initiatives, including the Compact for Growth. This is an effort coordinated with international partners to assist the institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina in reforming the economy and creating new opportunities for citizens. After the elections, they will need to engage on a broader set of issues. The efficiency and the functionality of institutions need to improve at all levels. We, of course, remain committed to their European perspective. But work needs to step up to regain some positive momentum and we will continue with our efforts to help and support.

The extremely worrying situation in Ukraine was at the top of our agenda today. We condemn unreservedly the actions by armed individuals in the cities of Eastern Ukraine. These attempts at destabilising Ukraine must stop.

We strongly support the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. We call upon Russia to do so as well and to pull back its troops from the Ukrainian border. Any further actions aimed at destabilising Ukraine have to stop.

In light of the latest events, we decided to expand the list of those subject to assets freeze and visa bans.

Utmost restraint is crucial and we commend the Ukrainian authorities for pursuing their law and order operations in a measured manner and we encourage the government in Kyiv to contribute further to reducing tensions.

Free and fair Presidential elections on 25 May are the best way to express the will of the citizens, as is the process of constitutional reform. We will continue to support the efforts to stabilise the situation in Ukraine economically, financially and politically. With this in mind, we have today approved two key measures in the package of proposals aimed at providing economic and financial support to Ukraine.

First, a decision providing up to €1bn in macro-financial assistance to Ukraine to support economic stabilisation and its structural reform agenda. Secondly, a regulation granting unilateral trade preferences to Ukraine. In the meantime, we will also look into a possible CSDP mission in the field of civilian security sector reform. And ministers have asked the European Commission to reply, on the basis of consultations with Member States, to the letter of President Putin on energy supplies.

We will also continue our diplomatic engagement to try to deescalate the crisis and stabilise the situation. It is crucial that Russia and Ukraine engage in a meaningful dialogue to find a political solution and we are ready to participate in the efforts to start this dialogue.

I am in regular touch with the foreign ministers of the United States, Russia and Ukraine and will meet them this Thursday in Geneva. The purpose of this meeting is to start a dialogue on how to de-escalate the situation in Ukraine and to ensure that peace and stability returns to the whole of Ukraine."