REMARKS

by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton at the press point

with Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs during her visit to Latvia

"I'm very pleased to be here today, especially to say to you Minister, my dear colleague and friend Edgars, how much I value the contribution that you personally and your country made to the European Union and especially in this context, to the work that we do on foreign policy. Your contributions on the Foreign Affairs Council are incredibly important, very timely and very knowledgeable on so many issues. I'm delighted that I have had the chance today to consult with you on some of the particular challenges that we are looking at in the present time.

As you have said, we've talked about a number of different issues and we have looked especially at our neighbourhood, South and East. Not surprisingly in the light of my recent visit to Ukraine and the EU-Russia summit we have focused to some extent at the east and at our relations with Russia. Many of you will have seen the outcome of the EU-Russia Summit, I think it was a very good meeting with important outcomes, and we look forward to the next summit that will take place in June.

Russia is an important strategic partner for the European Union and for its Member States. We were very pleased to invite Foreign Minister Lavrov to the Foreign Affairs Council for a dialogue with all EU foreign ministers. And there are some good examples of collaboration with Russia, not least in the work I do with Russia on Iran talks. All 28 Member States stand together in one team for a strong relationship with Russia. The strong relationship means being open and frank and honest about concerns in that relationship too. So we do not
hesitate to raise concerns and to want to see them addressed. And we will work closely
together as we build towards the next Eastern Partnership Summit which will of course take
place here, in Riga.

And as I said, today we also focused on Ukraine. I wanted just to give you a short read-out
about my visit. Not surprisingly, I was deeply worried by the reports that we were getting of
intimidation and violence. It is really important that any violence or intimidation should stop
and the people should feel free to express their views. It is extremely important now that the
dialogue really does begin to deal with the underlying issues of concern. This needs to be
Ukrainian-led and supported by all of us. Political leaders need to come together and also
need to engage with civil society. The role of Parliament is also extremely important, to
examine not just the Amnesty law which has been passed, but also constitutional reform.
And there needs to be a strong and clear commitment to free and fair elections in the future.
And we will continue to engage and to support Ukraine.

Finally, we also talked about the importance of our collaboration with Central Asia. And we
agreed to work together as we look forward to the Presidency of the EU next year to make
sure the relations are strong with the countries of Central Asia. Thank you."