



Brussels, 11 February 2014
140211/02

R E M A R K S

**by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton at the AFET
Committee, European Parliament Brussels, 11 February 2014**

"Thank you Mr President, it's a pleasure to be back at the AFET Committee. I thought it would be valuable to give you a debrief on the Foreign Affairs Council yesterday, which covered a variety of topics. I'm always pleased to talk more generally, but it's always helpful if you can let me know the issues you're most concerned with and I'll make sure that you get proper replies.

For today let me start with as you did, Mr President, Bosnia and Herzegovina where I raised this issue as part of my introduction to the Foreign Affairs Council.

I think a number of things struck everyone, the first is that this was violent protest borne of frustration in the main because of the economic situation in Bosnia Herzegovina. Those of you following it closely will know unemployment rates are running at about 40%, huge numbers of unemployed young people and although we can never condone violence in any circumstances, it is very clear that there needs to be real leadership now, leadership that I think many of us who have been following the situation, not just in Sarajevo but beyond, have wanted to see really try and take the country forward.

If you look across the countries of that particular region, you'll see significant progress being made in their journey towards the European Union and in their response to the political and economic needs of their people. Bosnia Herzegovina seems to me to be stuck.

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Great efforts we've made, and I pay tribute to my colleague Štefan Füle who has been doing a lot of work on the Sejdic/Finci case, but we need to do more and a number of discussions have been going on within the EU; with Member States, with the Services, with the Commission, and with our partners, not least the United States to see what further we might be able to do. We have a strong presence on the ground, real regional leadership. We met with candidate countries last night and this was one of our topics of conversation, but we need to do more.

We talked as well about the recent Summit with Russia and I gave a short debrief. We described the Summit as not 'business as usual'. There was a good and frank discussion with President Putin, most notably about our neighbourhood and differences were addressed in a frank and open manner, partly in a trilateral discussion between the three Presidents who sat together on their own and discussed openly and then in the slightly broader context of our discussions. We gave clear messages about our concerns.

The Russian President and his team also gave messages about some of the concerns that they have which led to the decision to hold some consultations at a technical level to explain in greater detail what the impact of some of the Agreements that we've been doing, especially the Free Trade Agreements with Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, how this would be in our view of benefit to the economy of Russia and to try and prevent the further spread of misinformation.

I hope that we will also see the discussion on new agreements going forward in the future. We want to make sure that we have a strong bilateral relationship, a relationship based on mutual respect for the approach that we take and an understanding of the work that we're doing and the way in which we approach our relationships with sovereign states in our neighbourhood.

In the main part of the Foreign Affairs Council we had a long debate on the Eastern Partnership, to both do a stock take after the Vilnius Summit, and to focus on what's been happening in Ukraine. Mr President, you and I were both in Ukraine, representatives of the Parliament have been in Ukraine, Commissioner Füle and others will be going into Ukraine, but there is much to say about that.

And in the context of the post-Vilnius work, how to support Moldova and Georgia as we move forward with our ambition to sign those agreements, well before the end of this Commission. I think there were some lessons that we took away from the Vilnius summit. Not least the importance of retaining high level political engagement as we run up to the next summit in Riga and as we look beyond that summit.

We've asked for Ministers to be ready to make high level visits, both individually and in teams under the umbrella of the European Union. Ministers have often welcomed this kind of coordination and certainly did so on this occasion. We needed to continue to broaden our engagement with different groups and society, to combat misinformation about the nature of the agreements with the European Union, this is particularly important in Moldova right now. But that means parliamentarians, and I look to parliamentarians here, to help and support that work.

I think you have led on many occasions the outreach not just to Parliaments but also to civil society. But we need also to reach out to business, and to local regional authorities so that they too understand the benefits of these agreements and the potential for their business, for their economic activity and for society as a whole. We need to take these messages out and to use our Delegations to enhance what we call public diplomacy, countering some of the negative messages and to make sure that we intensify at the same time the dialogue with Russia. We talked as well and especially about the visits that I've made to Ukraine twice in the last ten days.

We have real concern, and I said this in all the press conferences. I was really shocked at the difference between my first visit in December and my second visit in terms of the tension and the numbers of police. When I went back last week the situation felt a little calmer, but all of you have been, I know, following the violence. I've met many people who have been victims of that violence and heard many, many stories from others and have got and collected a great number of testimonials, photographs and so on. It is also very clear, when you consider this violence, that there is not much being done to do the kind of independent investigation that we would all expect to see in a 21st century, European democratic country, to make sure that perpetrators of violence were brought to justice and that the government needed to understand, and I've told them this directly, that people believe they're doing this in their name and it's very important therefore that the government sends the strongest possible message.

We have to find a way to help de-escalate, we've offered expertise, advice, mediation, support of any kind with every Member State, with the European Parliament, with the Commission. We have experts that can do anything and what we don't have we can find. So there is no question but the EU together with colleagues in the Council of Europe, OSCE and elsewhere can offer that help and we have made that offer loudly and clearly to all.

We've also been engaged and I know you, Mr President, were involved directly in the Parliament in discussions about constitutional reform and the importance of going back to not just the 2004 constitution, but what we call "2004 plus" to take out elements of the 2004 constitution, for example those that give the prosecutor's office great powers. We need to resolve those issues as well as the ways in which the parliament could move in the short term and in the longer term both to deal with the immediate unrest and concerns that people have, particularly in Maidan but also with a longer term strategy to actually make sure that they have a stronger and better constitution, rebalancing power in a way that would help this situation. Again, we've offered to support and help that process.

We're looking at the amnesty law, there were four options on the table for the Parliament. The one they chose is the one they chose. And you will know that there are deadlines built into that which we're watching very carefully. And of course, free and fair elections at the end of this process, ensuring the capacity of all to have their voices heard and for those elections to be open.

I've also been talking, as you know, about the economic issues. When I went in December, I spent three and a half hours with the President to go through each aspect of the economic problems of the country: short, medium and long term. And I can tell you that in all the

discussions I've had with the financial institutions, the Commission, Member States, other countries, it is clear that there is a capacity for us to be able to support and help what is clearly going to be a tremendous set of challenges in the economy in the coming weeks and months ahead.

But it doesn't come without reform. It comes because they choose to make the kind of economic reforms and changes that they need to in order to take the country forward. Whether that's reorganising industry so that it's more competitive, whether that's dealing with the short term problems that they have in terms of the budget deficit and so on. I will be going on Thursday to Washington, I have a meeting with Christine Lagarde and one of the subjects that we'll be discussing is Ukraine.

But Moldova and Georgia were also important and as I've said, looking to see that we had in place both the work that needs to get us to signature and work that needs to support them should they feel pressure as we move towards the signature of the Association Agreement and the DCFTA. I've mentioned already too, getting the information out about what this actually means for the people of these countries, for the governments, the opportunities it will bring, and we need to keep and sustain visits to these countries on a regular basis as we move towards that point.

Ministers wanted as well to discuss aspects of our Southern Neighbourhood and we discussed different countries in the context of the regional challenges that are being faced, so not surprisingly a lot of our thoughts were with Iraq and the terrible spiralling of violence that we have seen in recent weeks: the situation is very worrying. I speak regularly with Minister Zebari. He was very pleased to be in Brussels for the first meeting of the Association Council with them in the last few weeks but there are increasing concerns about what is happening in Iraq and of course Syria where today Lakhdar Brahimi continues his work to try and move forward with the discussions between opposition leaders and the regime.

As colleagues will know I was at Geneva I and I was at Geneva II. It is very clear that there is a strong political will from the international community to try and get these talks to move forward but it was also very clear that this is going to be extremely difficult. Both the rhetoric and the lack of understanding, in some ways, of what needs to be done, is still very present. We have to support Lakhdar Brahimi in what is an extraordinarily difficult job.

I also met with a group of Syrian women. Women of all faiths from different parts of Syria who have come together to try and develop their own response to this crisis and their own response to building the peace. It was a shame that there were not more women in the room in Geneva II, neither in the international community where I think Emma Bonino and I were the only two, nor indeed in the number of women represented in either delegation. There were some. And I do hope that we will see the women who have come together and started to do such great work and who I have asked to tell us what more we can do to support them play a stronger and bigger role in the future.

We have also been talking with Member States led by Luxembourg especially on the Security Council on the work they are doing to try and develop the humanitarian support that is going to be needed. And you will all be following the difficulties in New York in trying to get a resolution but also the practical ways in which we need to get this aid onto to the ground and

to the people. You will know too that we took a decision to make sure that funds that have been frozen in the EU can contribute to the Office of the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons trust fund to help to try and support the removal and destruction of Syrian chemical weapons.

Colleagues, we talked about Lebanon as well, the need to move towards an effective government. The caretaker government has been in place for a long time and I met with the Prime Minister a number of times. There is a real aspiration in these next days and weeks that progress will happen and that they will build towards the Presidential elections. But of course 25% plus of the population of Lebanon is made up of refugees from Syria. They do a great job but it is very, very fragile and we have to remind ourselves of the importance of continuing to support the people of Lebanon as they struggle with not only their own challenges but beyond that.

We had conclusions on Egypt. The third anniversary of the Egyptian revolution has just happened, there is a new constitution. We have noted how difficult the situation is and the worsening situation in many respects. A lot of people who have been arrested who shouldn't been in prison but our concern is equally for the growing amounts of violence and acts of terrorism which we condemn completely.

Continuing our engagement in the whole region in human rights in Egypt and all of the countries of the region and I want to pay tribute to Stavros Lambrinidis for his work in doing that and also to Bernardino Leon for his work in helping to, not least, get the agreement that's been so important in Tunisia. He played an extraordinary role in achieving that. And discussions too about the situation in Libya, where there is great instability and concerns that all the efforts that we are making on security sector reform are very difficult to implement in a situation that is so unstable.

Finally on the neighbourhood, discussion about Yemen, where we adopted conclusions which welcomed the outcome of the national dialogue conference. It is good to have stories that show that it is possible through dialogue to make change, to countries moving, although fragile, moving forward. And I think that is particularly true in Yemen. But there's much to do in underpinning the economic and social conditions.

And very finally, we talked briefly about the Central African Republic as we prepare for the mission. We have Major General Philippe Pontières, who is the operation commander. He has just been to Bangui to set up the work to put the operation on the ground and we adopted the decisions which will enable us to take that forward.

As I mentioned, we had dinner with candidate countries last evening where we talked about the neighbourhood with them as well.

Thank you."