REMARKS

by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton
upon arrival at the Gymnich

"Good morning. Welcome to the Gymnich. This, you know, is the informal Ministers meeting where we'll have an opportunity especially to focus on our neighbourhood.

I expect that Ukraine will feature in a prominent position, particularly how we support the people of Ukraine into the future. I think especially of the economy, of the presidential elections that will happen on 25 May, support for the Rada and the continuation of our work with our Eastern partners.

In that context of course we'll also be discussing Russia, You know Russia is our huge neighbour and in this situation we're looking to achieve two things. First of all the de-escalation: you know what that means in terms of troops on the ground. I attended the NATO Foreign Ministers meeting this week and I've been in contact with Secretary General Rasmussen as well as our partners. We're watching very carefully what happens. The description that somehow troops are moving back has not been verified by NATO, and it is really important that Russia shows that it is serious about the de-escalation by moving troops back and that's something that I hope we will see happening. But we'll be watching with great care what's happening there.
Secondly, it also means an understanding that nations are entitled to make their own choices and that we will not recognize the annexation of Crimea. It also means recognizing that we need to think carefully about our future relationships with Russia and with our partners in the East.

But I expect too that we’ll today recall the terrible situation in Syria and our aspirations to support the people of Syria in a political solution. Again I say to all of you how much we support the work of Lakhdar Brahimi in this very difficult time.

We will also reflect on other nations, on the situation in Egypt, on, I think, the success I’ve seen in Tunisia and of course the situation in Libya.

You know the countries in our neighbourhood are all different, all requiring different approaches and having different needs. There are common issues about how the European Union, Member States or Institutions can operate, the things we can do, the offer that we can make, and I think what we’ve always sought to do is to recognize that in our policy, called the neighbourhood policy, you need to differentiate individual countries.

I expect, as I get towards the end of my mandate, that the new High Representative and the Foreign Ministers will be looking at whether they need to have a different approach or whether they want to continue in the same way. And again it is part of the discussion here. The neighbourhood policy has served as well as a framework in which we’ve been able to work with our neighbours."