REMARKS

by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton
upon arrival at Foreign Affairs Council

"Foreign Affairs Council will today, not surprisingly, focus in large part on the situation in Ukraine. I'm delighted that the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, President Burkhalter, will join us for part of our discussion. That will be an opportunity to hear from him about the work the OSCE has been conducting, as you are all aware, in Ukraine, and also about the discussion that he's had with President Putin and his thoughts and ideas on how we move forward.

We are big supporters, as you know, of the OSCE, financially and politically, and I am delighted that he is able to be with us because I think that will help us to look further forward in how we move towards the important elections on May 25 when we want to see a democratically elected President of Ukraine. We will of course also review what was happening in Ukraine over the weekend, the so called "referenda" that were taking place.

When it comes to Russia, we are still looking for signs of real de-escalation. That means seeing where troops movements might be, it means also the signals that need to be sent to calm things down. Some of the words that we've heard coming out of the meeting of President Putin with the OSCE Chairman-in-Office could be encouraging. Again, I am waiting to hear from him directly.
You know that I was in Washington last week and discussed all these issues with Secretary of State and also the National Security Advisor, and here President Obama joined our meeting to discuss this. It will be important that we try move to that de-escalation as fast as possible. It’s what Geneva was about, it’s what we committed to in Geneva and we must all fulfil our commitments from there.

In terms of the elections - this is an opportunity for the people of Ukraine to democratically elect the President. This is something that I think is vital for the future, for the way of going forward. There are candidates out there that are ready to campaign properly. There is a real opportunity and I do believe that this could be a most significant moment and I hope that everyone will work to make sure this happens and this election takes place in the best possible way.

We will also be talking about the Middle East Peace Process. I stand firmly behind the work of Secretary John Kerry as indeed do the members of the Foreign Affairs Council. But it is our intention to reflect today on what we have been saying, including on the unprecedented package of support for both parties that were able to move forward; we need to assess what the pause means, how we can perhaps support and influence the process in the most constructive and helpful way. But our ambitions remain the same and we hope parties will get back to their discussions as quickly as possible.

We’ll also be talking about the situation in South Sudan. I am delighted to see that there has been the signature of the agreement and I pay tribute to all those who have been involved in that, not least our own special representative Alexander Rondos, who worked incredibly hard with the Ethiopian Prime Minister and with the parties to get to this point. We really do hope this will now help to prevent what could be a famine, what could be a very difficult situation for the people of South Sudan.

And I don’t have to say too that the thoughts of all of us remain with the families, especially the parents of the abducted children, the girls, in Nigeria, I have no doubt that that will become part of our discussions today as it is so important that we all continue to help to support the Nigerian government, to find the girls and reunite them with their families.

Thanks everyone."