Remarks by HR Catherine Ashton at the press conference with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov following the 8th meeting of the EU-Russia Permanent Partnership Council

Can I first of all thank you, Minister Lavrov, for your hospitality today. It is a great pleasure as always to be here in Moscow. You and I meet all over the world and we work together on a number of different issues, but it is especially a pleasure to be able to sit down and have the time to talk about some of our bilateral issues as well as the international issues that concern us both.

Can I first say how much I am looking forward to Russia becoming a member of the WTO. When I had the good fortune to be EU Trade Commissioner, this is something I have personally worked for and I am delighted that we have reached the goal. I think it will be to the benefit of Russia and to the benefit of the EU. I think it will be a real opportunity for us to develop a deeper economic framework in support of our businesses especially and I congratulate you and your team for all the work that has gone into achieving this and we look forward to the realisation of that ambition.

As you have said, Minister Lavrov, we have talked about a number of issues and I won't repeat everything you have said, but let me just focus on a couple of them.

I know how important the issue of visas is to the people of Russia. I am very pleased with the progress that is being made. It is often the early stages, the trying to look at all the technical issues, that takes the greatest time. You and I have been collaborating to try and make sure that we have those technical steps in place and I do hope that we will see real progress at the summit and of course beyond.

In terms of the energy package I think it is important that we collaborate as effectively as we possibly can. You have rightly raised the need to, when we are thinking about the Transcaspian pipeline, consider very carefully the ecological and environmental issues and we will indeed do so. And I think you understand the needs of the Europeans to be able to diversify how they get their energy, the kind of energy they get so as to provide the best for their citizens.
Like you I think the Partnership for Modernization has gone extremely well. This was something discussed between president Barroso and President Medvedev in the Summit in Stockholm and since then it has been a great delight to have our officials collaborate together to make sure that a great number of projects have been put in place. I think this is for the benefit of all parts of our societies and I am delighted to see it happening.

You rightly raised two issue of crisis management. As I have said in the beginning, we collaborate in many issues all over the world. We were discussing our efforts to fight piracy off the coast of Somalia. We are collaborating together in thinking how to support Middle East Peace Process and how to work with Iran to turn back to the past of getting nuclear weapons and to find a way to resolve these pressing issues.

But there are also things that affect us geographically from time to time in terms of what could happen by way of natural disasters and so the more we can do to make sure that we are working together the better - I think that is the best interest of everyone, best for the people of the EU and for the people of Russia.

And on foreign policy issues, specifically on Iran. When we left Istanbul, which was the last time I led the negotiations with Iran on behalf of E3+3, we left on the table a series of ideas for ways in which Iran could move forward with all of us and demonstrate to the IAEA that it was serious about turning away from a path of nuclear weapons and was seeking a civil nuclear program. I have said to Dr Jalili at the end of our conversation in Istanbul that we left those on the table and we were open for their ideas to put on the table and I am still waiting. And as Minister Lavrov has said, I have written on behalf of all of us again to say those ideas remain on the table, come and talk with us and respond. I believe that dialogue is the best way to achieve the outcome that we all want for the safety and security of the people of Iran and for the region and beyond. It is also the case that the Iranians have obligations that they have signed up to and they must make sure that they meet those obligations. And that is why it falls to the international community to put the pressure on to make sure those obligations are met. So I will continue to work as I do very closely with Minister Lavrov and with the other countries in order that we can do this. I am extremely content with the collaboration and cooperation that we have on this as you have seen from the resolutions in Vienna.

And on Syria: Three and a half thousand people have been killed, many thousands of people are detained, many more thousands have been injured in a situation that I believe cannot go on. The Arab League in recent times have made their position extremely clear and you will have heard King Abdullah of Jordan reiterate what many have already said: It is time for President Assad to stand aside. The future of Syria now depends upon the ability of all of us to keep pressure on Syria to see the end of the violence, to listen to the people and to find a way to move forward and I do hope that we will see significant movement in that direction in the next coming days.

And as I have began let me end. The collaboration that we have is of enormous importance not just in terms of the political work that we do, but also for the support that this gives to our citizens who want to see greater economic work and see us move forward together in the future.