Statement to the European parliament on the outcome of Presidential elections in Russia on behalf of HR Catherine Ashton delivered by Danish Foreign Minster Villy Søvndal

Strasbourg 14 March

Mr. President, Honourable Members,

It is my pleasure to be here today to discuss with you the outcome of the Presidential elections in Russia on behalf of High Representative/Vice-President Ashton.

Let me first of all thank Parliament for the strong voice it has consistently been giving to European citizens’ concerns about democracy, fair elections and human rights in Russia.

Russia is our largest neighbor, an important business partner and indeed a Strategic Partner for many global and regional issues. So it matters to our citizens what the situation with human rights and the rule of law is in Russia.

Parliament has followed both the Russian State Duma elections of 4 December and the Presidential elections of 4 March very closely.

It has adopted several resolutions expressing the expectations of European citizens for Russia to live up to her international commitments to ensure free and fair elections.

You have also given High Representative/Vice President Ashton several opportunities to address the Plenary on these crucial issues.

In addition, several hearings have taken place since December on these elections and on human rights more generally, organized by the Foreign Affairs Committee, by the Subcommittee on Human Rights, by the Parliamentary Cooperation Committee with Russia, and by individual political groups.

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Catherine Ashton has asked me to thank Parliament for all this important work. She also asked me to in particular convey the message that she shares Parliament’s concerns about the case of the arrest and death in pre-trial detention of lawyer Sergey Magnitsky.

Restrictive measures are a sensitive instrument that should only be considered in specific situations and in accordance with the respective EU guidelines. The European External Action Service is currently looking into options on how to convey our expectation that the investigation of this case be taken forward properly.

The Russian presidential Elections went largely as expected.

OSCE and Council of Europe observers gave a clear evaluation: Chances were not equal during the preparations; procedural violations occurred during the voting and counting process itself.

We agree with their preliminary report and will remind Russia of its international commitments to free and fair elections.

High Representative/Vice President Catherine Ashton issued a statement the day after the elections with 5 main elements:

She recognised the clear victory of Vladimir Putin.

She noted international observers’ recognition of significant civic engagement in these elections.

She referred to international observers’ findings of irregularities.

She encouraged Russia to address these shortcomings.

She looked forward to work with the incoming president and new government on our shared modernisation agenda which should cover both economic and political reforms.

Outgoing President Medvedev the day after the elections instructed the Prosecutor General to examine the verdicts handed down to 32 convicts considered by the opposition as 'political prisoners', including Mikhail Khodorkovsky and his former business partner Platon Lebedev.

The president has also ordered the Justice Ministry to prepare a report on the legal reasons for denying the registration of Mikhail Kasyanov’s, Boris Nemtsov’s and Vladimir Ryzhkov’s People’s Freedom Party (PARNAS). These are encouraging signals.

Next steps

We have a strong consensus in the EU that we must engage with Russia – critically, yes, but also constructively. Without Russia, we cannot solve the regional challenges in our Common Neighborhood, in Syria, or Iran, nor most of the pressing global challenges such as climate change and the environment.

This approach has been quite successful recently. With Medvedev and the government led by PM Putin, we have been able to build more constructive relations and to achieve results. Russian WTO accession is one key result that will bind this large economy into the international rules-based framework.

The Partnership for Modernization is another one. Many projects have already been prepared and launched, including technical and regulatory modernization as well as reforms of the judiciary and civil society involvement.
We have also begun a process on common steps to be fulfilled before we could consider launching negotiations on a visa-waiver agreement. All of this will be to mutual benefit.

The new civic and political awakening in Russia has already led to some political reforms, with the first Duma reading of bills introduced by President Medvedev to liberalize political party registration rules and presidential candidates’ registration requirements, as well as to reinstall direct elections of regional governors.

This process is encouraging and will have consequences, especially in Russia's many regions. Change may be slower than one would hope. But we should have patience.

It is a good thing that both authorities and protesters want gradual evolution, not revolution. A cautious but real dialogue has begun between them; the quality and dynamics of the political situation in Russia have changed.

The key issue for us now is how we can support this reform process. The bilateral initiatives just mentioned provide us with an excellent basis to build on. As Cathy Ashton has stated, the EU looks forward to working with the incoming Russian President and the new government in full support of our shared modernization agenda.

The next major step in our Strategic Partnership, apart from all the ongoing regular work, will be the next EU-Russia Summit due to be held in Russia before the summer.

I thank you and look forward to hearing your views and to your resolution that will be adopted tomorrow.