Mr President, Honourable Members of the European Parliament

I am pleased to have the opportunity today to brief you on behalf of High Representative/VP Ashton on the latest developments and the European Union’s activities in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is a key player in the wider region of Central Asia and an influential actor in international fora.

It has recently held the chairmanship of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Since its independence 20 years ago, it has been the European Union’s policy to support Kazakhstan’s economic and political progress.

The EU has a strategic interest to further deepen our involvement with Kazakhstan and to fully develop mutual political cooperation potentials; especially considering the rapidly evolving regional integration dynamics.

Kazakhstan is a pragmatic partner, open to reform and willing to explore opportunities. The EU is also an important trade and investment partner for Kazakhstan.

The recent start of negotiations on a new Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Kazakhstan was the signal of the importance that the EU attaches to its cooperation with Kazakhstan.

However, strengthening EU-Kazakhstan relations does not – and cannot – occur independently from the progress of political reforms in Kazakhstan.
The respect for common values of democracy, rule of law and human rights are the basis for deepening our relations. This is a statement we jointly made with Kazakhstan in 2009 and we stand by it.

Therefore, we maintain our position that the success of negotiations on the new agreement will be influenced by the advancement of political reforms and fulfilment of Kazakhstan’s international commitments.

In this context, we are concerned about the recent developments and the overall slow progress of political reforms in Kazakhstan, including the limited implementation of international commitments.

According to independent observers from OSCE, both the early Presidential and early Parliamentary elections in 2011 and 2012 fell short of meeting democratic principles.

For the first time since Kazakhstan’s independence, we have seen high social tensions including a number of terrorist attacks. The strike of oil workers that started in May 2011 culminated to violent clashes with the police in December 2011, resulting in 17 dead and about 110 injured.

To cope with evolving security challenges and threats, the Kazakh government amended a number of laws over the past few months. It has introduced changes that seem to empower the state more and more, while restricting the rights and freedoms of citizens, civil society and political opposition.

The High Representative/Vice President received several questions from the Honourable Members of the Parliament about these developments, and about the EU’s approach, opinions and actions taken.

She and services actively follow the situation in Kazakhstan.

Over the past eleven months, there have been more than ten statements issued by Catherine Ashton herself, and the EU at the OSCE Permanent Council.

On 17 December 2011, immediately after the violent clashes the High Representative’s spokesperson published a statement expressing concerns, calling for immediate investigation of the events, and peaceful solution to the situation of the striking oil workers.

The European External Action Service and the EU Delegation in Astana have maintained regular contacts with the authorities, calling on Kazakhstan to uphold its international obligations and commitments, in particular regarding freedom of expression, freedom of association and assembly. The Prosecutor General’s Office in Kazakhstan is carrying out an investigation and the EU has demanded that this process be thorough, transparent and not be used to target any specific group or to intimidate the Kazakh opposition.

On 2 February the High Representative/Vice President met with the Kazakh Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Kazykhanov, where she expressed her concerns and raised specifically the arrest of a number of opposition activists, including Mr. Kozlov, leader of the Alga opposition movement and Mr. Vinyavski, an independent journalist.
As a follow-up, on 9 February the EU Delegation in Astana carried out a demarche, asking for information on the health of Mr. Kozlov and access to him by his wife and lawyer. Thanks to this, the EU Delegation visited Mr. Kozlov in the military hospital in Almaty, where he had undergone surgery.

The EU Delegation was able to confirm that he had not been ill treated and his surgery was due to a previously existing health issue which was not an urgency.

The EU’s efforts and communication with the authorities, notably the cases discussed in the regular Human Rights Dialogue with Kazakhstan, also yielded results. The jailed human rights activist Mr. Zhovtis was granted amnesty and released in February 2012.

Also the trade union lawyer, Natalya Sokolova, who was sentenced to six years due to her role in the strikes, was released on 7 March, and her sentence was replaced by a three year conditional sentence.

The EU has, several times, expressed its readiness in providing support to Kazakhstan for reforms, for the investigation of December events as well as to address the underlying socio-economic problems that led to tensions in the country to begin with.

The EU is funding several projects that are already tackling issues that contribute directly to the improvement of the social, economic and political situation. These include projects on regional development, public service reform and modernisation, support to judicial and legal reform, local governance and to civil society development as well as several projects relating to democracy and human rights.

Promoting and supporting reforms in these areas, and further enabling relevant actors, are priorities both for the civil society and the Kazakhstani authorities, at central and regional levels.

We also expect that the perspective and negotiation process of the new Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement will provide a stimulus for Kazakhstan to make more progress, notably in enhancing freedom of expression, freedom of association and encouragement for real political pluralism.

To motivate progress, we foresee to include fundamental political and economic reform commitments in the new agreement, including aligning regulations to EU norms and standards, and essential political clauses on human rights and the rule of law.

Kazakhstan’s commitment to these fundamental principles will be a strong and clear expression of it’s will to step up political and economic reforms

WTO accession would also be a clear expression that the country takes economic transition seriously and is ready to commit to multilateral rules and it would show that Kazakhstan is willing to bring increased legal certainty to our relations. This is in the interest not only of Kazakhstan but also of the EU and the wider international community.
This is, by no means, a simple process. We are only at the beginning of these important negotiations. However, we are determined to ensure that the European Union continues to stand alongside the Republic of Kazakhstan and its citizens, both as a friend and a partner, on the path of political reform and economic development.

And in this endeavour, we count on the support of the European Parliament and we look forward to the resolution that you will adopt tomorrow.

Thank you.