Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton following the Eastern Partnership Ministerial Meeting

Brussels, 23 July 2012

We had a good meeting that gave us an opportunity to have thorough discussion between 27 member states and 6 partners on our ambitious agenda of political association and economic integration.

Negotiations on Association Agreements - including in most cases Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas - are progressing well. We are also advancing on our visa liberalization agenda where we have now started a dialogue with Georgia to develop a Visa Liberalisation Action Plan, similar to those with Moldova and Ukraine.

There was frank and open discussion on the progress made so far and the remaining challenges. It has helped us better understand problems our partners are facing.

Obviously, partners are at very different level in terms of establishing sustainable democracy. Today’s discussions will enable us to better tailor our policy toward partner countries so that we can keep the Partnership as inclusive as possible. This will also help us to accommodate specific needs and ambitions of those who are the most advanced on the implementation of the agreed goals.

Reforms and genuine commitment to common values of freedom, democracy and human rights remain the underpinning elements of the Partnership. I welcome the good progress achieved by some partners in this area. More work however is still needed.
The presence of FM Martynov has allowed us to convey the EU’s deep concern as regards the lack of respect for human rights, the rule of law and independent media in Belarus. We stressed the importance of the immediate release and rehabilitation of all political prisoners, of reversing the current repressive policies and of free and fair parliamentary elections in September.

Our message to Belarus was clear: there is no place for political prisoners at the heart of Europe. At the same time we remain attached to a policy of critical engagement with Belarus. The Eastern Partnership provides an important platform to expose Belarus to democratic values and the virtues of European cooperation. For the people of Belarus we are ready to deepen cooperation once the political situation has changed.

The Eastern Partnership remains a priority for the EU and for me personally, working very closely with my colleague and friend Stefan Füle. We are determined to support on-going transformation of partners toward sustainable democracies. We will pursue vigorously our agenda of political association and economic integration, based on common values of democracy and human rights.

The next time we will meet in 2013 we will be able to assess the progress on reforms and achievement of joint objectives and we look forward to the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius next autumn.