Remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton
following Foreign Affairs Council 11 March 2013

We have discussed a number of different issues today but I am just going to focus on three of our discussions for the purpose of this press conference and then take your questions.

Can I begin by saying what a great pleasure it was to welcome the Joint Special Representative Brahimi to our meeting today to discuss the current position in Syria.

We continue to strongly support his efforts to create space for political dialogue between the opposition and representatives of the regime.

The only solution to this crisis is a political one, and we are ready to assist in any way possible. At the same time, we are determined to increase assistance to the Syrian population and support to the opposition.

We have demonstrated our resolve to do so in many ways, including our decision last month to "provide greater non-lethal support and technical assistance for the protection of civilians", and also through the financial assistance which now totals more than 500 million euros.

Besides the more than 400 million euros in humanitarian assistance, other programmes support human rights activists, civil society and displaced populations and help children's access to education.

We are looking at ways we can work with the opposition to help restore basic services, such as medical supplies, water purification and power generation, and even some administrative services. Meanwhile, we continue to work with our international partners to further narrow down differences.
I have to say that Mr Brahimi has shown great determination in his difficult task. He can depend on the EU to stand by him as he continues his work, and we are willing to continue to support him in every way possible.

We held a comprehensive debate on all aspects of our strategic relationship with Russia, including domestic developments, foreign policy cooperation and the state of our bilateral relationship.

Foreign ministers confirmed our interest to work constructively with Russia on a broad range of issues.

They include foreign policy. We already work well together on questions such as Iran, MEPP and Afghanistan but of course we want Russia to engage more when it comes to Syria and protracted conflicts in the Southern Caucasus and Moldova.

We discussed the Eurasian Union and how this integration process fits with the EU's policy within the Eastern Partnership. Ministers recalled the important upcoming Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius later this year.

We underlined too the importance of the New Agreement. In terms of trade there is a lot of potential and we welcome Russia's membership of the WTO, but we are looking to Russia to respect the commitments made in this context.

When we were discussing the domestic situation in Russia, there was a great deal of strong concern over recent developments limiting the activities of Russian civil society and negatively influencing the democratic rights and freedom in the country.

We therefore agreed to continue to seek constructive engagement with Russia in areas of common interest and to strengthen our overall strategic relationship, while recalling Russia's commitments to guarantee democratic rights and freedoms in line with commitments undertaken in the OSCE, the Council of Europe and elsewhere.

The debate today showed strong EU unity in its approach to Russia and I will report on the outcome of our discussions to the European Council later this week when we discuss relations with our strategic partners.

The final area that I want to report on from quite a broad discussion on a number of issues was on recent events in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya.

I have always said that it is extremely important that the European Union is effective in its response to challenges faced in our Neighbourhood and we continue to remain determined to do everything we can to assist the political transition in our neighbouring countries. Transition is never easy.

There is of course widespread concern about the deteriorating socio-economic situation in Egypt, and the uncertainties surrounding the planned elections.

We will continue to engage with all parties to encourage inclusive talks and to ensure that confidence in the democratic process can be restored. This is crucial to move the transition forward.
In Tunisia, we welcome the proposed new government, and hope the new Constitution will be approved rapidly and that new elections can be organised soon.

We will be ready to provide support to the elections through the deployment of an EU Election Observation Mission.

In Libya, the constitutional process is delayed.

We continue to provide financial and political support and have achieved some good results - for example, with our support 1.2 million pupils went back to school in 2012.

It is important to relaunch negotiations for a comprehensive framework agreement with Libya which will ensure a solid legal footing for a long-term relationship.

We will continue to prepare our CSDP mission on border management.