Speech by High Representative Catherine Ashton at the opening session of the 7th Ministerial Meeting of the Community of Democracies

Thank you very much Mr President, Mr Prime Minister, Ministers, Excellencies.

It's a great privilege to be making my first visit to Mongolia and to have the opportunity to congratulate Mongolia on its chairmanship of this Community of Democracies and the organisation of this event.

I want to begin by quoting from the Treaty of the European Union. It says in it that "the Union's actions on the international scene shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation and which it seeks to advance in the wider world - democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity". This is the mandate for the action we take across the world and we do so as the European Union, with the knowledge that democracy is a journey and not an event. We recognize today nations who are, as the 27 nations of the European Union are, on that journey with us.

I spoke on this occasion two years ago about what I learnt to call deep democracy: democracy where you ensure that the roots of democratic freedoms are well established so democracy can flourish and cannot be easily destroyed. But like all things with roots, there is the ever present need for nourishment and vigilance to protect, to strengthen and to develop.

Over the last two years since we met our world has seen dramatic changes.

Some of the people sitting here with me bear witness to some of those extraordinary events across the neighbourhood of the European Union and across the world. In so many countries we've seen people searching, striving and sadly too often dying for democracy and freedom.
The response that we give them has to be to offer them support.

Democracy and human rights are at the heart of all we do – in our engagement with leaders, but of course our engagement with civil society, with journalists and bloggers, with activists, with women and men from every part of life.

We do so from the European Union to offer some of the experience and knowledge that we have, the experience of many of the leaders in Europe, civil society, activists across Europe - to share what they have learnt through often difficult and hard times. Gathered here today I see colleagues from all walks of life who know only too well how difficult it can be and whose own experience bear witness to that.

We have created the European Endowment for Democracy to support individuals and groups with funding from the European Commission and member states to:

- help pro-democracy activists obtain the help that they need;
- help parliaments and parliamentarians to understand their responsibilities and the requirements upon them to reach out to those who elect them;
- support judicial reform and the rule of law - essential elements of any democracy - so that citizens can rely on institutions and legal frameworks that are supposed to help them;
- send electoral observation teams over these last twenty years in over 110 countries to help give confidence in electoral systems and to support improvements in democracy.

This is support not just for the democratic process but to give confidence to those who we let in the process itself.

These are just a few examples of where we spent over 1.1 billion euros over the last 6 years in support of democracy and human rights.

But my main message would be this: there is still a lot to do. There are still things that matter and things where we have to invest if we are to be sure of the future.

We have to give people the tools of political life. To help by education in understanding what democracy is, what it offers and what it requires of individuals and of political parties. We need to make sure people have access to voting, access to the information on which to base their vote.

We need active civil society engaged on all aspects of life - human rights, climate change, nursery education, rural development: encouraged to be active and to be activist - supported to challenge governments and leaders - NGOs free to operate in countries and across the world.

We need flourishing political groups - engaging with people. We need ways to make sure that people can register, systems in place to support parties and voters.

And we need engagement with everyone – particularly women who in many societies have not been part of political life and have been told for far too long that it is not for them. Ensuring they get the funding they need, the support they need, and that they get elected.
We need to make sure too that we root out corruption in any form – that the rule of law operates well, a judicial system in support of the people. And to make sure that we give back confidence to voters that when they vote in the democratic process those votes will be counted, will be real and will lead to the results they want.

We need the accountability of government and we need to help the opposition to become government in waiting. Colleagues, these are just some of the elements that strike me, but there is much more to do.

Across our world we see heroism in the pursuit of democracy - not as end in itself but as the best guarantee that the nations of the world belong to the people and not the politicians. The best thing about democracy is that you can throw a government out and elect someone else.

Democracy is to give people choices - they don't always make the ones we might want - but we want them to have the right to have that choice.

And democracy more than anything is the best guarantee of the fundamental rights and freedoms that we strive for.

Gathered here are those who know this to be true. Gathered here are people who have risked everything to achieve this: democracy as a way of life. That is to ensure that for all nations, democracy becomes a way of life.
Mr President I am honoured to be here with you.