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R E M A R K S

by EU High Representative/Vice-President Catherine Ashton at the end of her visit to Ukraine

"Good afternoon everyone!

During my visit to Ukraine I spoke to very many people and I followed events through the night. I want to say at the very beginning that I really do condemn the use of force, it's totally unacceptable. Especially when, like me, you've had the chance to see how people are demonstrating peacefully. More than anything, the message that I've been giving over these last days has been the importance of dialogue and the importance of listening to what people are saying. I think the people of this great country deserve better.

I came here more than anything to offer our help. I've been meeting as you know with the President, with government, with opposition, civil society and with the three former Presidents. And I really have two clear objectives in mind. The first, in the short term, to help to find a way out of this crisis and to help to support the dialogue that's necessary to achieve that. And then to think about the longer-term future of this country. Again, I go back to that same word, the importance of talking with each other and of ensuring that there is a real understanding of the way forward.

We've had a lot about roundtables in the last days and I know it's difficult in the light of recent events. I've been saying very clearly that if you have a roundtable you need to include everyone: I think it needs to be at the highest level and I think it needs to be with a clear set of objectives. We've also said it's very important to see the release of all those who've been arrested and I mean release: let go, I don't mean another form of arrest or anything else, I

FOR FURTHER DETAILS:

Michael Mann +32 498 999 780 - +32 2 584 9780- Michael.Mann@eeas.europa.eu @EUHighRepSpox
Maja Kocijancic +32 498 984 425 - +32 2 298 65 70 - Maja.Kocijancic@ec.europa.eu @AshtonSpox Maja

Sebastien Brabant +32 460 75 09 98 - Sebastien.Brabant@ec.europa.eu

Eamonn Prendergast +32 460 75 32 93 – Eamonn.Prendergast@ec.europa.eu

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mean let go. I've discussed this twice with the President who has told me that's what will happen.

I also think that it's really important to see any acts of violence investigated. Some of you will be aware of the Council of Europe, who have come forward through Secretary General Jagland with a proposal, which we support, to see an independent investigation. It's so important when violence happens, and I've seen some of the footage, that there is a chance to examine what occurred, to bring people to justice and to ensure that it does not happen again. Again, it's a very important part of the way to go forward.

We think, in the longer-term perspective, that this country looks for the same values that I, and the European Union, hold dear: the freedom of assembly, the basic human rights that people should have. We also believe in the strong economic relations between us. Not about making choices, but about recognising it's possible to have strong and good relations with all neighbours. Relations that will not only drive the economy in the short term, but drive the economy in the longer-term, to make sure that the potential for this nation to develop economically is realised.

In my discussions with the President, I talked about agriculture; an enormous opportunity. I talked about energy, again the reserves that you have can be exploited to the benefit of this nation. And access to the largest market in the world, the European Union, is an important part of developing the economy. The President has assured me when I've met him that he does intend to sign the Association Agreement. I want him to do so and I believe that doing so swiftly is the best way to also address the short term economic challenges, which he says are at the forefront of his mind at the present time. Because it's not only through the longer-term, but also through the opportunity that having a strong relationship with the European Union has, in terms of what that will do with the markets, what that will do in terms of accessing financial support, which I call these short term issues. So I really do hope that that will happen soon.

We will stay engaged - we wish all the people of Ukraine well - both through my work and through the work of other ministers of the European Union, who you will see here, through the European Parliament, through our Ambassador Mr Tombinski who's here, and through the Ambassadors of the European Union who work together as a team. We will stay engaged because we actually care very much about your future. As a sovereign state, we believe you have choices that you can make and we hope that you will choose as part of that to have the strongest possible relationship with the European Union.

Thank you very much!"

Questions/Answers:

Question on dialogue/roundtable/mediation and different views on them.

Ashton: *You know when we've been talking about the idea of a roundtable, bringing people together, there are different ways in which you can have support. You can have people who can come and observe, you can have people who can come and actively participate and sometimes you can have people who come and mediate. What we have said is that we are willing to offer any support that would be of value. Not, I hasten to add, to get in the way of the dialogue that needs to happen. This is about a dialogue between people here. But simply because we may have something to offer in that. I've said that to the President, I know there's been some discussions between some people today, I wasn't part of that. I think that he is interested in what we might be able to do and I've said that with the opposition leaders who I'll be meeting again tonight. You know, we will do whatever we can to support. It's also about working out how this dialogue is going to be done and how people are going to be brought together and if there's a way in which we can add value to that we will.*

Question on signing Association Agreement/DCFTA and on possibility of sanctions in response to violence.

Ashton: *I've said that what I heard from the President was that he would sign, I said no more than that. And twice in the last twenty four hours he's told me that that's what he intends to do. He talked at length about his history of wanting to see the strong relationship with the European Union. I merely tell you that that's what he's been saying. I believe he should sign as soon as possible, because I think it's in the interest of Ukraine to do so. I have to accept that what the President says to me, is what he's saying to me, for me to carry back the message. But you know, it's always important to verify by seeing what happens next and we want to see what is said turned into what is done. In terms of anything else, we've had some discussions about what happened last night. I made it perfectly clear that this is not the way to go forward. I made it perfectly clear that we expect to see discussion and dialogue with people who are using their right to assembly to make a peaceful demonstration and that any action that provokes a situation, intimidates people, is most likely to result in more people feeling that they want to participate in what's happening. So it's very, very important that we move now to serious dialogue and serious discussion.*

Question on possibility of roundtable after last night, with a follow-up on the main message.

Ashton: *One of the messages that I've been giving is that yesterday when I was talking to opposition leaders, a roundtable was very much in their mind and I met as you know with the three former Presidents today, who've also felt that this is a way forward. I understand the challenges of that now in the light of what's happened yesterday, that's why it's so important that what happens now is peaceful and calm. I also think that it's really important for those in leadership to reach out, again that's the message I've been giving. It's very very important that there is a way in which people know that people are released, that there is an outreach*

to start a dialogue; that we bring people together. Ultimately that's what needs to happen, in order that the situation can be addressed properly.

The way to interpret the message is by what happens now. What's essential is that we are crystal clear about what needs to happen – from the international community – about the importance of ensuring that our view and our position is understood. And I believe that we've done that today: we've made it absolutely clear that we expect to see – and it is vital to see – a move forward. Not least, if I put it very simplistically, if your challenge are short term economic issues – what on earth do we think that the economy is doing right now; do we think that the economy is improving; do we think the markets are looking here positively; are we attracting inward investment to Ukraine in these days and so on – there's a real, important element to this in actually addressing the challenges that were the reason why the Association Agreement wasn't signed in Vilnius in the first place, according to what the President and others have said.

Question on the plan the President should follow.

Ashton: *I haven't laid out a plan – this is a sovereign state where plans need to be developed by those in leadership positions – but what I said were the following things:*

- First of all, you need to release the people who have been arrested;

- Secondly, that you need to start a dialogue with the people who are in leadership positions; with civil society, which plays such an important role including many I've met and been very impressed with today; with former leaders; with leaders of the opposition and with others in society.

First of all, to explain to them what is happening, why the decision was made and what the implications of that could be. Secondly, to explain to them the seriousness with which the proposal to sign in the future is made – much more important for the people here to believe than anyone else – and to start talking about what it is that has brought so many people out into the streets and about the importance of agreeing that you still have the perspective for the future of a strong relationship with the European Union. That does not preclude strong relationships with other neighbours – you need those too and we've always said that. But we think there's a lot to be gained and that the people of Ukraine have made it very clear that that's what they want to see.

Question on economic support of the EU and various "economic offers".

Ashton: *This is not about bids for this country. This is your country. This is about an economic plan: the Association Agreement and free trade agreement are part of a bigger plan – the plan that takes you, as a country, into a stronger economic place and, I believe, a stronger political place too. Within this are plans that would help to support the development of industry; the development of business; the development of the economy. Linked to that, the opportunities that arise - because people see this in association, for businesses to invest; for institutions to want to invest – will grow.*

In terms of the short-term issues that the President has been concerned about, those really fall into two or three areas. One is the price of energy; one is the question of the poorest people in society and one is about industries that find it hard to compete and develop in a time when it's hard to find investment. All of those issues can in a sense be supported, can be helped by a combination of resources that can be given through European institutions, through other financial institutions and through countries that want to support your future. All of these things can be discussed – can be talked about and can be done in the framework of the Agreement. The Agreement doesn't stop the opportunity to be able to solve those problems.

So this is not a decision about "oh here's x amount of money if only you'll sign", we're not interested in that. We're interested in this country having the best possible opportunity to grow and develop its economy in the strongest possible way. And you need a combination of things – you need loans, you need grants, you need investment, you need to build small businesses, you need to see industries that need to diversify or develop in a different way, do so. In Europe we've had all of these challenges, we know how to do that and we know that we can offer support for the institutions who can come in and help you achieve that too. So it is much more about that kind of package than it is about cash sums that would somehow bring you closer to us.

Thank you very much.