Brussels, 17 March 2014
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R E M A R K S

by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton

following the Foreign Affairs Council

"We had an in-depth discussion about the latest developments in Ukraine, including yesterday's so-called referendum in Crimea.

We strongly condemn the holding of this referendum, which is illegal and in clear breach of the Ukrainian Constitution.

We recall that deployment of Russian forces is a violation of Russia's international commitments. Let me stress that the EU does not and cannot recognise the outcome of a referendum under these circumstances.

We also deplore the further negative developments we have seen on the ground, which are in clear violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. We do regret that Russia has so far not engaged in negotiations with Ukraine.

In the absence of positive steps and in line with the statement of EU leaders on 6 March, we have today decided to introduce additional measures, more specifically restrictive measures against 21 individuals responsible for actions which undermine or threaten the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine.

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Their names will be published in our Official Journal later today.

We want to underline very clearly that there is still time to avoid a negative spiral and reverse current developments.

We call on the Russian leadership not to take steps to annex Crimea and instead to take steps to de-escalate the crisis.

Russia should withdraw its forces and begin direct discussions with the government of Ukraine, including through all relevant international mechanisms, for a peaceful and negotiated solution, in full respect of international law and Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The EU is ready to support facilitating such a dialogue.

We have also given our support for the swift deployment of an OSCE Special Monitoring Mission on the ground throughout Ukraine. I hope that such a decision can be taken in Vienna today or tomorrow.

We have discussed the efforts in support of stabilising the situation in Ukraine. The EU will sign the political provisions of the Association Agreement with Ukraine on 21 March in Brussels. This is a strong signal of political support to Ukraine.

We will also provide strong financial support for economic and financial stabilisation of the country, as presented by the European Commission in its assistance package to Ukraine which we are committed to implement rapidly. That includes autonomous trade preferences, which will start to be applied within a few weeks.

The EU will also continue to assist Ukraine in securing its energy supply and to enhance people-to-people contacts.

We commend the measured response shown so far by Ukraine in response to the crisis. We encourage the authorities to continue with this approach, including with an inclusive process, efforts to ensure free and fair elections and constitutional reform.

All acts of violence need to be properly investigated and measures need to be stepped up to combat impunity. The possession of unauthorized arms is totally unacceptable.

The authorities also need to reach out to all Ukrainian regions and ensure the full protection of national minorities.

We have also touched upon other subjects in the Foreign Affairs Council.

I briefed the ministers about my recent visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina and the importance of how best to support BiH in addressing the huge economic, social and also political challenges they are faced with.

We also had a brief discussion about what we are doing on the Middle East Peace Process. We are fully supporting the US Secretary of State Kerry in his efforts and the Israeli and Palestinian engagement in the current negotiations.

The EU is determined to provide unprecedented support package for both parties in the context of the final status agreement on the basis of a special privileged partnership.

We want this to create huge opportunities in transport, energy, water, environment, people and business to business.

We want to see progressive market integration, trade and investment facilitation, research and innovation, security cooperation that will benefit Israelis and Palestinians, with a special emphasis on young people. Our approach will be tailor-made and will be negotiated with both partners.

I just want to finally add that the EU opposes a boycott of Israeli companies and business. We don't want to see Israel isolated, but I reiterate our position regarding settlements and the territorial applicability of bilateral agreements."