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Speech of High Representative Catherine Ashton on the EU-Russia Summit

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"I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the EU-Russia Summit which will take place in Brussels beginning tomorrow evening.

Let me first say a few words on the elections.

Parliamentary elections to the State Duma were held on 4 December. When we discussed in July in this House the preparations for these elections I expressed then some concerns, especially regarding restrictions to political pluralism.

Following up on those observations today, the prior exclusion of various opposition parties has been confirmed as a key flaw of those elections. In addition we have seen reports about procedural violations such as the lack of media impartiality and the lack of clear separation between political party and state.

I have also expressed concern at the detention of protesters demonstrating for free and fair elections, and reports of police violence against activists, journalists and mere observers.

In contrast, the large demonstrations over the weekend in Russia were peaceful – and the authorities in my view generally handled it very well.

P R E S S

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I welcome the instructions by President Medvedev for all accusations of irregularities to be properly investigated. The electoral legislation that exists in Russia provides for appeal and rectification, and we expect of course that this legislation will be respected.

The evidence needs to be looked at, and OSCE/ODIHR and other organisations will issue their final reports in due course. Their findings must be addressed by the authorities in order to allow for smooth and fair presidential elections in March.

We should also recognise that the Russian people have made full use of existing possibilities to express their dissatisfaction with some aspects of the political situation. To many commentators' minds, voters expressed their views on issues such as corruption, lack of political freedoms and their economic situation by voting for other parties, bringing down the registered result for the leading United Russia party from 64% in 2007 to less than 50% now.

Thus the citizens have passed a clear message, and it certainly has not gone unnoticed. Both President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin have acknowledged receipt.

The future development of democratic institutions in Russia, as I said in July, should depend on the Russian people and their choices.

The EU is not a bystander however. We have close links from the economy to family ties and to common history. When acting together, as strategic partners, the EU and Russia can have a decisive influence on key challenges and conflict situations around the globe.

We have also taken joint commitments to develop democratic institutions and human rights in the UN, the Council of Europe and the OSCE frameworks.

We are now working closely together with Russia in support of modernisation, supporting Russia's full integration into the international rules-based system, and the development of citizens' rights and freedoms.

The upcoming EU-Russia Summit will prove that this approach of constructive engagement works. The Summit will actually produce a rather impressive number of results.

Let me mention Russia's WTO accession first, which should be officially decided in Geneva on Friday. As Russia's largest trading partner by far, the EU is a crucial partner in the 18-years long negotiations. As former Trade Commissioner, I had my own personal experience in this process.

WTO accession will be a historic moment which will open a new chapter in our bilateral relations. It will bind Russia to international trading rules, open new opportunities for trade and investment and protect our companies from arbitrary decisions.

WTO accession should also give new momentum to negotiations on the New EU-Russia Agreement.

On visas and mobility, the Presidents will be approving a list of “Common Steps towards visa-free travel”, full implementation of which should lead to the opening of visa waiver negotiations. This process implies a significant modernisation in areas like migration policy and border management, but also guarantees for the respect of fundamental rights.

Improved mobility and people-to-people contact will bring our people closer together and facilitate the exchange of experience and values, cultural cooperation and business.

Last but not least, the Partnership for Modernisation is under full implementation, with new projects being prepared. At the Summit, we will re-emphasize our conviction that modernisation is not only about technology. Rule of law, protection of citizens’ rights, civil society engagement, and a level playing field for companies are all crucial elements of successful modernisation.

Let me finish with a few words on foreign policy. Russia is a major partner for the EU. Sergey Lavrov and I meet regularly and try to build common approaches to the most pressing international issues. Generally we succeed, but in some cases our positions differ, like e.g. on Syria, which no doubt will be raised at the summit.

We also need to advance on protracted conflicts. On Transnistria, we have managed to restart formal 5+2 talks. Progress on substance now needs to follow. We will continue to engage in order to support the mediation efforts over Nagorno Karabakh by the Minsk Group, in which Russia is a member. I visited the South Caucasus last month and we are concerned about the lack of progress in these talks, as tension is very clear throughout the region. And we will continue to engage Russia over Georgia, where Russia still needs to fully implement the commitments it made in the August and September 2008 agreements.

Let me conclude. As you can see, we have a broad agenda with Russia, which reflects the way in which our economies, our societies and our strategic concerns are increasingly intertwined.

As we remove barriers to trade, travel and exchange, the outlook and expectations of our citizens can be expected more and more to converge and the fundamental interest in co-operation will increase.

Our ambition is for EU-Russia relations to be the engine for this modernisation process, which we have always maintained must be both economic and political.”