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Speech by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on Cyber security: an open, free and secure Internet, Budapest, 4 October 2012

I am grateful to our Hungarian hosts for organising this Cyberspace conference. It is really important that we maintain the momentum from the meeting in London last year and that cyberdiplomacy continues to move forward. Everyone who was engaged in London - governments, private companies and civil society – share a common goal of looking for a way to ensure a free, safe and secure use of cyberspace. As several speakers have said before, this has never been more relevant than today.

We have talked about the unprecedented opportunities an open and free cyberspace has brought to all our societies. The internet accounted for more than 20 percent of GDP growth in the world's major economies over the last five years. According to a study by the Boston Consulting Group, the Internet is already contributing up to 8 percent to GDP in some of the G-20 economies. If it were a national economy, the Internet economy would already rank in the world's top five – and its significance just keeps growing.

The benefits of the Internet go far beyond its direct economic benefits. As I deal on a day to day basis with the world's most pressing foreign and security policy issues, I am particularly aware of the potential that worldwide connectivity has to serve as a catalyst for many positive global developments, from the reduction of poverty to education and of course greater access to information. It is one of the most powerful agents for change, growth and jobs everywhere, but its impact is particularly forceful in the developing world. The Internet supports learning efforts in remote villages, provides information for innovators, and it empowers women and girls in developing societies.

It is remarkable to think that the number of internet users in developing G-20 countries will be three times the number of users in developed G-20 countries in three years time. In 2005, that number was just one third!

P R E S S

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We all have seen how the Internet has promoted social and democratic reform. It has put power in the hands of people. Less than two years ago, social media opened our eyes to what was happening and what we have come to call the Arab Spring. Young people could send us news from the ground through Twitter, Facebook or YouTube. Social media did not topple these regimes. People did that.

But access to the internet and technology changed the means and speed by which change was brought about. Every day hundreds of hours of video clips from Syria are uploaded on You Tube – making sure that human rights violations there do not go unnoticed, despite the attempts of the regime to seal off the country. There are 43 million Facebook users in the Arab world, including 15 million women, with 170 million tweets sent around in the Arab world every month, socially marginalised people are connected.

But we are also aware of the challenges that go along with opportunities. All of our essential services in our societies depend on cyberspace – we rely on it for functioning transport, for supply of power and water in our houses, for communication, for connectivity. This vulnerability of our societies is bound to attract destructive forces. At the same time, authoritarian regimes use the Internet as a tool for repression, rather than for innovation and development. And we could see in these recent weeks how irresponsible individuals can exploit the opportunities offered by the Internet for sectarian and extremist purposes.

We therefore need to take all precautions to make sure that the Internet is not becoming the victim of its own success. We need to protect Cyberspace from attacks and make sure it continues to function reliably. We need to intensify global efforts to fight cybercrime that is shaking the confidence of online services and is thereby damaging our economies. I looked at a recent Eurobarometer survey, and it showed me that 29% of EU citizens do not feel confident to use Internet for banking or purchases. 12% said they had already been victim to online fraud. At the same time, we have to resist attempts to use security concerns as an excuse to suppress the Internet.

We all believe the protection of fundamental rights is as important in the virtual world as it is in the real world – we stand united in Europe on this principle. Freedom of speech, freedom of expression, freedom of association, as well as the right of access to information need to be respected in Cyberspace. The European Union is determined to promote and defend its values online. For everyone to enjoy the benefits of cyberspace it has to remain free and open. It is a guiding principle of EU Cyber diplomacy. But we also have to recognise our responsibilities to it.

I would like to point particularly to the need to protect our children from those who would threaten or abuse them, this is unacceptable in every walk of life, and it is unacceptable in cyberspace too.

We need to agree the norms of behaviour in cyberspace between countries. Some important initiatives have already been launched to build trust and confidence between countries.

There is a need to establish crisis communication lines and to enhance dialogues on cyber issues. Trust and confidence should be improved not only between states, but also between private and public sector.

To help us promote good behaviour, we should apply already existing international laws in cyberspace, for example the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. If conflicts extend to cyberspace, we can follow the Geneva Conventions. We should find ways to apply the principles of those commonly accepted laws also in this new domain, rather than starting to draft new ones.

When it comes to addressing cybercrime, I strongly encourage all countries to follow the principles of the Budapest Convention. It is the most efficient international instrument in this regard.

To address challenges posed by transnational cyber threats, we also have to step up our efforts in increasing cyber security capacity globally. To make sure we can do this, there is a need for new capacity building programmes and also for better coordination of existing initiatives.

I welcome very much what William Hague said today about the Centre for Global Cyber Security Capacity Building. In the same spirit the European Union is already financing international cyber security capacity building efforts such as training of law enforcement specialists.

In recognition of the importance of cyberspace issues we are also preparing the European Union Cyber Security Strategy – this document will bring different EU policy areas together and will be launched in a few months time. The Strategy intends to harmonise the readiness of EU countries to deal with the security challenges in cyberspace.

Preserving the benefits of cyberspace is a shared responsibility for all of us – the private sector, civil society, governments, international organisations, and individuals. So the current multi-stakeholder model of Internet governance that recognises the importance of all these different stakeholders has to be preserved and has to be strengthened. We need the private sector, not least for initiative and innovation. We need civil society; we need the grass-root elements that have created a global Internet society and the World Wide Web.

The Internet as we know it, use it and enjoy it is exposed to many challenges. Some would claim that the threats to the open internet were never as big as they are today.

Freedom and creativity have made the Internet flourish, and the Internet has in turn tremendously inspired creativity and helped to promote freedom on a global scale. I would argue, ladies and gentlemen, it is a unique success story. This conference is an important moment to work together for a safe, secure and free internet.
