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Speech by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton at the 6th Ministerial Conference of the Community of Democracies in Vilnius

Thank you very much for the opportunity to be with you here in Vilnius today.

Secretary Clinton just said that democracies flourish when they are supported by other democracies. I agree with that because coming from an organization that represents 27-country "community of democracies" which is the European Union we are witnessing that every single day. I want to commend again the vision of Madeleine Albright and Bronislaw Geremek that brought this Community to life 11 years ago – and particularly the idea that democratic values are universal, and that this could be a global community.

We have come together to learn and to share: No democracy – anywhere on that globe – is perfect; and none is complete.

Every national Democracy is a journey: it is something that continues to evolve.

In the EU we recognise that the journey is best if it shared.

Democracy is the founding value of this Union: it is hard-wired into everything that we do.

And in 1993 in Copenhagen, the EU stated very clearly that no country can join unless it is a democracy.

The process of EU Enlargement – with 10 former dictatorships joining in 2004 and 2007 – has been the EU's most successful democracy support strategy.

And what we believe for ourselves within our Union we go and promote beyond our borders.

The Treaty of Lisbon is very clear, and I quote: "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, and respect for human dignity."

These beliefs go further.

P R E S S

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First, we believe that while democracy is a set of shared values and principles, it does not have an established model: it will always adapt locally, at its own pace and in its own style. Above everything, democracy must be wanted and owned locally – it cannot be imposed.

Secondly, we believe that it is very hard to have Democracy without Development, or Development without Democracy.

The evidence for that is very clear: the two are inter-twined, and mutually reinforcing. Democracy brings economic benefit; it attracts investment; it creates jobs. And economic certainty is the condition for people to engage in and support democracy.

Thirdly, we believe that democracy is much more than voting governments in, or out.

What I so often call ‘Deep Democracy’ brings the dividend – and the safe knowledge – that those elections, those opportunities to vote governments in or out, are part of a wider and established system of true democratic institutions (a civil service, an independent judiciary, a police force) and true democratic culture, seen in a lively and responsible media and civil society, and perhaps in the way a society cares for its most vulnerable people within it.

Our European beliefs about democracy naturally become our European actions in supporting it, all over the world.

We have built in clauses into our discussions and dialogues, commitments into those processes of political dialogue with third countries.

And when I visit countries across the world I see how we are really trying to actively support democracy, now most especially in our neighbourhood.

When I took over this position I said that Europe should be judged by its success in our neighbourhood. I believed that 10 years ago, a year ago and I certainly believe it now.

So the work that we do in our neighbourhood and across the world matters hugely in terms of supporting and promoting these values.

Like the work we are doing now on election laws in Moldova, the strengthening of the party political system in Tajikistan, including women in the political process in Azerbaijan and in Ghana, involving young people in Kyrgyzstan, or indigenous people in Bolivia.

Like promoting a free press in Cote d'Ivoire, building trust in the electoral process in Bangladesh and in the Philippines, training policemen, judges, prison officers, customs officials in 20 civilian EU security missions around the world. And observing and making recommendations on elections all over the world.

I have mentioned just a few of the thousand or so projects that have been funded with half-a-billion-euros over the last ten years by the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights.

More than that: when the EU sees its shared values, global and democratic values are being abused, we want to speak out and be very direct.

You will have seen that just this week I have made statements endorsing the work of the International Criminal Court in Libya, after it issued arrest warrants for Muammar Gaddafi, Saif Al Islam Gaddafi and Abdullah Al Sanousi; and supporting the High Court in the Democratic Republic of Congo to investigate the death of the human rights campaigner Floribert Chebeya.

And beyond those words are economic sanctions, in countries like Zimbabwe, Burma/Myanmar and – most recently – Libya, Syria, and Belarus.

We do this because we believe that humankind's deepest instincts want dignity and self-determination.

The Arab Spring again shows us the universality of democracy and democratic principles, and of peoples' aspiration to determine their own lives.

In North Africa and the Middle East in these last months, we have seen the results of that deep-felt view of injustice and disempowerment, and a powerful plea for dignity, rights and opportunities.

In my view, the loudest and most eloquent voices have been those of women and young people.

Our task in the European Union – both in North Africa and around the world – is to give what support we can to this democratic aspiration.

That is why I proposed a new ambitious European Neighbourhood Policy, which builds on existing partnerships with our 16 partner countries both to the East and to the South, and has democracy and prosperity at its heart.

In recognition of that partnership, it is mutually accountable – both parties have to keep promises that we make.

In recognition of conditionality, we offer more support, in response to more reform.

In recognition of individuality, we respond to each country's own particular circumstances and aspirations.

And we know we can always do more to deepen and improve that support.

We do so within the framework of the so-called "Conclusions on Democracy Support", adopted by the European Union's Council of Ministers in November 2009.

Those conclusions represented a big strategic step, designed to bring together all of our democracy work and ensure that it – like democracy itself, you might think – is a truly dynamic process, based on first-hand experience.

That is why, I put my support to the proposals put forward by Poland, by Radek Sikorski, for a "European Endowment for Democracy" – flexible, non-bureaucratic tool, free of the imprint of government and free of EU bodies, which can help countries find their democratic voice.

We have to make it add real value. For example, how it can help young people talk to each other in cyberspace, to reflect on the use of social media, so important in the countries of our neighbourhood, and by that advancing those democratic dialogues through democratic channels.

So – in all of this, the European Union and the Community of Democracies have similar goals. I encourage this Community in its very necessary work to reform and reinvigorate its various working groups, and I welcome more dialogue – with it, and within it.

I end where I began, with the universality of democracy.

This is no European Union project or US project – it is a global aspiration, as real in Africa and Asia as in South America, the Caribbean and the Pacific.

This global aspiration means that we in the European Union welcome the fact that the chairmanship of this Community will now move out of Europe – first to Asia, to Mongolia, and then to Latin America and El Salvador.

This is the democratic journey in which we are all engaged, anywhere in the world. The journey has the same goals the world over, and faces the same challenges.

The European Union will play its part – what we hold dearest at home, we want to support abroad. Such is the universality of democracy.

Thank you.