

Press conference of Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Venizelos and EU High Representative and European Commission Vice President Ashton at the close of the Gymnich meeting of EU Foreign Ministers (Athens, 5 April 2014)

E. VENIZELOS: Thank you. I am here just to welcome publicly Cathy Ashton and my counterparts from the other European countries, hosting the Gymnich Council, this Informal Meeting of Ministers for Foreign Affairs. It is a great pleasure and a great opportunity for every European Presidency, because of the high level of debates, and I think that will be quite clear from what Cathy Ashton has to say by way of introduction and from our discussion with you.

C. ASHTON: Can I begin by thanking you very much, Deputy Prime Minister and your team, for the excellent organization of this Meeting and this wonderful venue. We've had a really interesting two days and in this setting we have had the opportunity to talk about our neighborhood, both south and east, and our relations with strategic partners. Not surprisingly, Ukraine was at the top of our agenda and I can remind everyone that we remain united in our determination to act together to deal with the threat to Ukraine's sovereignty and stability.

I invited this morning our candidate countries to join us, so we can talk with them as well about the latest developments in our neighborhood. We had a very good discussion, we covered a range of different issues: we talked about relations in the Western Balkans, we talked about the ongoing challenges that we see in Syria and our concerns about Libya, and also the work that we are doing on all of our neighborhood countries to help them develop economically and politically. We think of the successes of Tunisia and we also think of the challenges currently in Egypt.

We welcomed too our dear friend Elmar Brok, the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament, who came to join us yesterday, again, in order to give us his perspectives and the perspectives of the European Parliament on some of these issues. So, an important two days of deep discussion.

The Gymnich is a place where ministers can talk freely about the issues of concern, and we were able to relate to each other in terms of how we take forward our policy, and we continue as ever to develop the work that we are doing. Just one other point, because I am conscious we have a number of issues, we have the elections in Afghanistan, which we're monitoring closely, and I also want to impress on everyone our complete support for Secretary Kerry and the work that he is doing on the Middle East peace process at what is an extremely challenging time.

Thank you.

A. MAYER-HOHDAL: Hello, I am with the German Press Agency DPA. Lady Ashton, two quick questions, if I may.

First on Turkey, was there any discussion with the Turkish representatives or among the ministers as far as the YouTube ban, the Twitter ban, EU concerns about these measures? And secondly, on Afghanistan, if you could say a bit more how concerned are you about the violence we have seen in the run-up to the elections.

Thank you very much.

C. ASHTON: Thank you. On Turkey of course we raised with our Turkish colleagues, as we do in all situations, the issues and concerns that we have about what is happening. We hope that post the local elections things will now move forward. We noted the Constitutional Court's decision and we also made it clear that social media play an incredibly important part in the life of all communities, including Turkey, and our Turkish colleague talked to us about the reforms that they are expecting to see coming forward. So, it was an open and frank discussion.

On the Afghan elections, this will be an historic moment, if we get this right, this democratic transition. We want to see everybody participating, including, I would say, all the women of Afghanistan, and we welcome what has been done to try and prepare for these elections. The latest information I have has been that things are going forward and we are waiting to see now what the results will bring.

Mr A. ATHANASSOPOULOS: Thank you very much, from the newspaper "Vima" in Athens. I have a question for both Lady Ashton and Mr Venizelos.

I would like to ask you, are you concerned by the recent, I would say, aggressive comments by the NATO Secretary General and SACEUR General Breedlove on Ukraine and do you believe that they help to de-escalate the crisis in Ukraine?

Thank you very much.

C. ASHTON: We work very closely with the NATO Secretary General, with SACEUR, and I attended the NATO Foreign Ministers Meeting, where we were able to discuss the situation in Ukraine. You can describe the comments however you like, but I think what was very important was the unity of the NATO countries, who are working closely together to address real concerns about what is happening in Ukraine and the consequences for the thinking that we all need to have about the future.

E. VENIZELOS: As you know, Greece participates always in the European and the Euro-Atlantic mainstream. Our position is very clear, our policy is a policy of principles, our pillar is always the need for respect of the international legal order, but on the other hand it is very important for us to keep open the channels of political and diplomatic dialogue, because we need a consensual political applicable solution. The main issue now is the de-escalation.

JOURNALIST: Thank you. Mrs Ashton, did you talk about the Weimar Triangle proposal to consult Russia on the talks with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia about association agreement, and would you personally say that it would be a good signal towards Russia now to consult Russia now on this issue?

C. ASHTON: Well, actually, if you read the paper, what you will see is that the three ministers – who incidentally of course went on my behalf, on behalf of the whole European Union to Ukraine, for which I thank them very much – they were talking about some of the technical underpinning issues. And we have, within the EU the Commission has been talking to Russia about the implications of our agreements with other countries, not least because by the analysis that I have seen the free trade agreement with Ukraine would have a positive impact on the Russian economy, and we think that's an important message for Russia to get.

So, all contributions are very welcome to our discussions and deliberations about how we go forward, and you will see over these coming days that we continue to engage with Russia, with our Ukrainian colleagues and with the United States, in making sure that we have a strong way forward.

E. BETHANI (Hellenic Public Television): Thank you very much. One more question concerning the Ukraine matter. If these actions of the European Union turn out to be ineffective, what will be the next step, the alternative plan for the European Union?

Thank you very much.

C. ASHTON: Well, you will see from the conclusions of the European Council that I think there are two aspects to this. One is the importance of ensuring that we are prepared to take measures, if that is felt necessary, and work is ongoing to do that. Secondly, that the importance of trying to persuade Russia to de-escalate the situation and to, as ever, work closely with Ukraine to try and find a way through this – and I think this is what Mr Venizelos was talking about, the importance of ensuring that we do that. And that's a dialogue that we are constantly engaged in and will continue with.

E. VENIZELOS: Perhaps I can give you a brief response in Greek, both to the Greek Press and to the International Press.

Sanctions are not an end in themselves. Sanctions are a tool, an instrument that we use, always in the framework of international law. And the purpose of those sanctions is to ensure that international law is complied with. But above all the idea is to create the preconditions for a diplomatic and political solutions, so as Baroness Ashton quite correctly said, the essential question now is de-escalation, but beyond de-escalation, the goal is to create an appropriate climate so that we can come up with a definitive and functional solution.

Thank you very much.