Statement by the Minister for European Affairs, Lucinda Creighton TD
to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade
European Neighbourhood Policy, Enlargement of the European
Union and Developments in the OSCE

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The twenty seven, soon to be twenty eight, countries of the European Union have led the way in creating a framework for close cooperation between nations, in establishing a basis for friendly relations in our neighbourhood.

As you will know, Ireland currently holds the Presidency of that Union, an opportunity the Irish Government and people have always valued.

The Presidency has allowed Ireland to demonstrate that we are a constructive and committed Member State that belongs at the very heart of the European decision-making process.

We are now over halfway through our term and we remain firmly committed to ensuring that our seventh Presidency leaves a positive, strong and lasting legacy both for the EU and for Ireland.

**Enlargement**

The Presidency, as expected, is turning out to be eventful for the EU's enlargement policy. Croatia is due to join the Union on the 1st of July.

We have been working hard at reinvigorating the accession negotiations with Turkey.

The pace is picking up with Montenegro.

Last month we received the Commission and EEAS reports on Serbia, Kosovo, and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. At this point in time in the Irish Presidency, I am hopeful of the prospects for the EU enlargement policy in the months and, indeed, years ahead.

The last monitoring report on **Croatia**, issued by the Commission on 26 March, was positive, confirming that Croatia is generally meeting the commitments and requirements arising from the accession negotiations.

The General Affairs Council on 22 April adopted Conclusions commending Croatia for the results achieved and looking forward to welcoming her as the 28th member of the European Union on 1 July.
Croatia held its first European Parliament elections on 14 April to elect the 12 MEPs who will represent its citizens in the Parliament for the 12 months leading up to the European elections in 2014.

The process of ratifying the Accession Treaty for Croatia is advancing well, and I am confident that it will be completed on time. This will allow us very soon to conclude what has been a long journey, starting ten years ago.

**GAC Discussions**
The agreement reached last month between Serbia and Kosovo allowed the Commission and High Representative Ashton to issue positive reports which were considered by the General Affairs Council on 22 April.

Discussions are only just beginning among EU Member States, but I would hope that come the end of June, we may be in a position to agree to proceed to the next step in the accession process for each country.

For Serbia, that would be opening accession negotiations; for Kosovo, opening negotiations on a Stabilisation and Association Agreement. Implementation of the agreement will be key to ensuring a positive decision by the Council. I welcome the fact that High Representative Ashton will continue to facilitate discussions on implementation over the coming weeks.

The General Affairs Council also gave consideration to the Commission’s report on the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

The report was relatively positive, though recognising that more work is required. Again we plan to return to this in June.

As well as the name issue, the political situation will be a consideration. Following the events of 24 December, I welcomed the agreement the political parties eventually came to which allowed the municipal elections to proceed.

Further engagement with and respect for the political and democratic process is required. It is important that all leaders of the country demonstrate the political courage required to put the country’s strategic priorities ahead of narrow party political interests.

**Current Candidates**
For the countries in negotiations, we are hopeful of being able to open a negotiation Chapter with Turkey during our Presidency, which would inject new momentum into that country’s accession process.

While the EU-Turkey relationship goes back a long way, it has not yet achieved its full potential. We are therefore working hard to encourage further progress, though this will also require significant effort from the Turkish side.

Negotiations with Montenegro are at an early stage, but we were pleased to be able to open a negotiation Chapter last month, and hope to open another in June.
Attention is also being paid to the rule of law Chapters. The negotiating framework for Montenegro puts into effect the “new approach” which sees progress achieved on the rule of law chapters linked to overall progress in the accession negotiations.

**Iceland** is already well advanced in the accession negotiations. In advance of the elections, which took place last month, the Icelandic government took a decision to slow down the accession negotiations.

All EU candidates have, of course, the right to pursue the negotiations at a pace which they deem appropriate to their particular situation.

The Icelandic government has throughout this process acted with the upmost transparency in all its dealings on the accession process.

I would hope to see the new Icelandic government decide to continue with the negotiations. However, it will be for this new government to decide how they wish to proceed.

**Prospective Candidates**

Turning to the prospective candidates, there are three countries that have a European perspective but are not yet official candidates.

I have already mentioned Kosovo. For **Albania**, the Council stands ready to consider granting candidate status when the Commission reports that necessary progress has been achieved.

Progress has been patchy, in recent months, and it is unlikely the Commission will be in a position to deliver its report during our Presidency. The elections due on 23 June are a factor in this. It is of crucial importance that these are free, fair and transparent.

**Bosnia and Herzegovina** is now lagging behind its neighbours, and this is an issue of concern. The Bosnian government and political leaders must make real and sustained progress in order to realise the country’s EU perspective.

What is required is clearly laid out in the December Council Conclusions, and in the June 2012 roadmap agreed by the Commission and Bosnia and Herzegovina’s leaders.

Unfortunately, the timetable for implementing the roadmap has slipped.

This lack of progress is frustrating. While we will do everything in our power to encourage movement on the path to EU integration, this is ultimately a matter for the political leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**European Neighbourhood Policy**

I turn now to the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).

The ENP was developed in 2004 with the objective of avoiding the emergence of new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and sixteen neighbouring countries to the south and the east.

The aims of the policy are to strengthen prosperity, stability and security in the EU’s neighbourhood.
The policy covers 22 of the EU’s closest neighbours; 6 to the east - the Eastern Partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) and the 16 countries of the Mediterranean and North Africa which form the Union for the Mediterranean (Algeria, Bosnia, Croatia, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey and the Arab League.)

Libya, which has observer status, has recently been asked to join also. The Union for the Mediterranean is the only forum which brings together both Israel and the Arab states.

The ENP is based on individual partnerships between the EU and each individual neighbour through a single policy based on mutual accountability and a shared commitment to the universal values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Eastern Partnership
The Eastern Partnership covers the EU’s relationship with the six countries which lie beyond its Eastern periphery. They are all former constituent Republics of the Soviet Union, whose hopes and futures will affect all EU Member States.

While this is true of both the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood the economic potential of the Eastern Neighbourhood countries give them a particular importance to us in Ireland, looking for new markets to fuel export led growth.

For Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, the EU has an interest in offering them a form of integration with Europe which will transform the lives of its citizens.

The Lisbon Treaty recognised this by committing the EU to the development of a special relationship with neighbouring countries aimed at establishing an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness.

This resulted in the launching of the Eastern Partnership in May 2009 at the Prague summit meeting of the EU and its Eastern European partners.

Since the Prague Summit, the Eastern Partnership has established itself as a long term EU policy for bringing the six Eastern European partners closer to the European Union.

In practice this has involved the negotiation of Association Agreements with all the Eastern Partner counties.

Association Agreements lay out for each country a road map of reforms, tailored to the situation in each country, in such areas as democratic values, good governance, and rule of law.

EU financial support is available for the reform efforts of each country according to the principle of “more for more”. The more progress they make in reform the more support they get.

In addition to the Association Agreements, each Eastern Partner country is in the process of negotiating a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) which will give them access to the EU and provide opportunities for EU, including Irish businesses, to export goods and services, and invest in a safe legal environment.

Negotiations on the Association Agreements with Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova are nearing completion. Much of the more recent work has been done during our EU Presidency.
It is intended that the final draft of the Association Agreements with these three will be initialled at the next Eastern Partnership Summit to take place in Vilnius in November under the Lithuanian EU Presidency.

Negotiations for the Association Agreement with Azerbaijan began later and are moving at a somewhat slower pace. If the Association Agreement is ready by November, however, it, too, will be initialled in Vilnius.

Negotiations for the Association Agreement for Ukraine are complete and it will hopefully be signed in Vilnius. This is a critically important year for EU-Ukraine relations, however.

The December Foreign Affairs Council set out, in its Conclusions, the three issues that Ukraine would need to address convincingly to enable signature of the Association Agreement in Vilnius. These issues are: the ending of selective justice; legal and judicial reform; and the holding of free and fair parliamentary elections.

There have been some positive developments recently, including the pardon of former Interior Minister Yuri Lutsenko and former Environmental Protection Minister Heorhiy Filipchuk by President Yanukovych.

Mr. Lutsenko’s release represents an important step by the Ukrainian authorities towards addressing the EU’s concerns about selective justice.

However, Deputies may be aware of last week’s judgment of the European Court of Human Rights, which found that former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko’s pre-trial detention was arbitrary and unlawful.

In the light of this judgment, I would call on Ukraine to reconsider carefully Ms Tymoshenko’s ongoing imprisonment.

I would also like to commend the important contribution made by the European Parliament’s monitoring mission to Ukraine headed by Pat Cox and former Polish President Alexander Kwasniewski in this context.

Last month the European Parliament extended the mandate of the monitoring mission and President Schulz praised its important work, which has steered EU-Ukraine relations in a positive direction.

The one Eastern Partner that is not part of the Eastern Partnership process is Belarus. As the Committee will be aware relations between the EU and Belarus are problematic due to the country’s human rights record.

A particular concern relates to political prisoners and continued use of the death penalty, after a brief moratorium.

A list of Belarusian officials who have been active in implementing harassment of opposition of civil society groups or business figures who are profiting from their closeness to the regime of President Lukashenka are subject to EU sanctions.

These include a visa ban on visits to EU Member States and a freeze on assets held in the EU.
Other countries, including the US, have implemented similar sanctions. Release and rehabilitation of political prisoners must take place for sanctions to be relaxed.

All EU member States regard it as important to support civil society in the country. EU Member States represented in Minsk, and our own Ambassador resident in Vilnius, have good contact with opposition and civil society groups.

In spite of our differences with Belarus, we believe that we need to maintain a critical dialogue with the authorities also. We therefore continue to regard it as an Eastern Partner.

Foreign Minister Makei, although subject to the visa ban, will continue to be invited to Eastern Partner meetings on a case-by-case basis. We hope that in time the Belarus authorities it will come to see the advantages of closer relations with the EU.

**Southern Neighbourhood**

I turn now to the Southern Neighbourhood. The dramatic events of 2011 led to a major review of the European Union’s relations with the region and forced a reappraisal of the policies and programmes it had pursued up to then.

Over the past couple of years, the issue which has undoubtedly received the closest and most sustained attention from Ireland and the EU has been the political transformations in the Middle East and North Africa linked to the Arab Spring.

While the crisis in Syria has understandably taken up much of our time, we have also addressed other issues in the region.

A little over two years on from the popular uprisings which first took hold in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011, any reasonable assessment must conclude that the process of change we are witnessing has been largely positive in its consequences for the region.

Of course, there have been many challenges and setbacks, with the conflict in Syria clearly presenting a major threat to peace and stability in the region.

But this should not be allowed to overshadow the very real and positive changes we have seen, such as the holding of democratic elections in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, effectively for the first time in most cases.

The EU, for its part, is committed to upholding key values, such as respect for human rights and the rule of law, in the efforts it is making to provide support and partnership to the countries undergoing transition.

The scale of the humanitarian crisis now raging in Syria and across the neighbouring region was brought home vividly to the Tánaiste when he visited a Syrian refugee camp on the Turkish-Syrian border during his visit to Turkey on 7/8 April.

Well over 70,000 dead; more than 1.4 million refugees; and over 4 million within Syria who are in need of humanitarian assistance. Ireland and the EU have been to the fore in responding to this major humanitarian crisis.
The Tánaiste was able to announce a further €1 million in assistance from Ireland for ICRC and UNHCR operations within Turkey during his recent visit. This brings our total aid over the past year to €8.15 million.

The generous and humane manner in which Syria’s neighbours -- in particular Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq -- have dealt with the huge outflow of refugees from Syria has to be repeatedly acknowledged.

The crisis is imposing major strain on hard-pressed resources and on the ability of these countries to cope.

It underlines the urgent need for progress in ending the violence and putting in place some form of political process which can set Syria on the path to political transition.

Discussions are continuing within the Foreign Affairs Council on how the EU can most effectively promote a political solution and use its not inconsiderable influence in that direction.

In February we renewed the full range of EU sanctions in place against the Assad regime in Syria for a period of three months. A further decision on their renewal will be taken at the Council on 27 May.

We have already made clear on a number of occasions that Ireland does not favour any actions which could contribute to greater militarisation of the conflict. This will continue to be our position. There can be little doubt about the growing influence of extremist groups on the ground in Syria.

It is in all of our interests that the capacity which already exists in Syria for armed violence should not be augmented. Rather, we should work to promote the earliest possible end to the conflict and the initiation of a political transition.

The UN Security Council can still play a decisive role in supporting Special Representative Brahimi’s efforts and promoting a political settlement.

I urge all Council members, accordingly, to exercise responsibility and leadership by adopting a strong new resolution addressing issues such as a comprehensive arms embargo and the need for accountability.

I should add that Ireland firmly supports Secretary General Ban in the efforts he is making to comprehensively investigate any possible use of chemical weapons in Syria.

The threat which the conflict in Syria poses to overall regional stability and security is also abundantly clear.

Lebanon has already been hugely affected through the influx of some 400,000 Syrian refugees and outbursts of related violence in northern Lebanon.

The April FAC meeting reviewed developments in that country following the resignation of former Prime Minister Mikati and the appointment of a new Prime Minister, Tamaan Salam. We must ensure that Lebanon, a country which has suffered too long from being in Syria’s shadow, can avoid being drawn directly into the conflict.
Our continent’s history left the EU uniquely positioned to fully understand what drove the citizens of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere to challenge the continued denial of their basic rights and to demand a say in the decisions that shape their future.

A key feature of the European Neighbourhood Policy strategy is the adoption of an incentive-based approach.

This promises closer political association, increased economic integration, improved mobility and additional financial support to those partner countries genuinely committed to political and democratic reforms.

New funding streams to the tune of almost €700 million have been made available to Southern Mediterranean countries for this purpose.

During 2011 and 2012 Task Forces, involving all EU institutions and the private sector, were set up for Tunisia, Jordan and Egypt to act as a focal point for assistance to these countries.

In 2011, an EU Special Representative for the Southern Mediterranean, Bernardino Leon (who was in Dublin this week), was appointed, tasked with enhancing the EU’s political dialogue with the countries in the region engaged in transition.

There is ample evidence that the ENP works best when a political willingness to reform exists and when civil society, including the media, is allowed to play an active role in the national reform process.

We all appreciate the key role that civil society plays in social and economic policy reform, in promoting women’s rights, in supporting freedom of expression, in pressing for media freedom, in striving for greater social justice and in holding governments to account.

We have also intensified trade relations with countries in the south. Negotiations with Morocco on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area Agreement have recently commenced, while similar talks with Tunisia and Jordan are expected to start shortly.

Politically, the situation remains positive with clear democratic progress in Libya, Tunisia and Egypt, while basic freedoms have been advanced in many other countries.

Ireland and its EU partners have had a clear and consistent message of support for these democratic changes while respecting that the countries concerned are best placed to determine their own pace of reform.

The Arab transformation will remain a major priority for the EU and Ireland at all levels of our international engagement.

We will certainly use whatever influence we have in our current EU Presidency role to support and promote European and UN efforts and initiatives towards promoting democratic progress and equitable economic development among the countries in transition in the region and a peaceful resolution of the Syrian conflict.

ENDS