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President of the European Commission

**Statement of President Barroso
following the meeting of the European
Commission with the Russian
Government**

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Joint Press Point

Brussels, 24 February 2011

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,

Let me say to you how happy I am to receive today here Prime Minister Putin. I think it is very important to have this meeting between the European Commission and the Russian government led by Prime Minister Putin

In fact, we had a very fruitful and constructive meeting with the Russian Government.

The depth and quality of our discussions, in this largest executive-to-executive meeting ever, reflects the importance we both give to our dynamic strategic Partnership.

In this sense, we have also discussed today important issues that are very high on the international agenda. We will also agree on a joint statement on the Middle East and North Africa, that have been the centre of intense dialogue, namely between Cathy Ashton as EU High Representative and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov. We condemn and consider unacceptable, the use of military force to break up peaceful demonstrations, as well as any other manifestation of violence. In particular, we highly condemn the violence and the use of force against civilians in Libya, which has resulted in the death of hundreds of people. We express deep regret and condolence for the loss of human lives. We urge all parties involved to show responsibility, respect human rights and international humanitarian law, and ensure the safety of civilians and foreign nationals. Supporting the peoples of Arab countries in their aspirations for a more just and prosperous life, we stand ready to provide economic and other assistance to interested countries at their request.

But of course, a great part of our very constructive, very concrete discussions, was in terms of the EU-Russia relationship.

This meeting has shown – yet again – how important are our common interests. Russia is our third largest trading partner. The EU is the biggest market and investor in Russia - 80% of FDI in Russia comes from EU companies. Russian energy is key to keeping Europe going. Our industries, our households are very much linked to Russia energy.

We believe it is our interest to work together for modernisation and to increase opportunities for citizens both in Russia and the EU.

Today, we have discussed how we can further boost these strong common interests, and how we can resolve a number of outstanding issues.

We welcomed the substantial progress made on the Partnership for Modernization. Our work-plan for the Partnership is now under implementation and giving results.

A successful modernisation strategy, to which the Russian Government has committed itself, must address the economy, technology and the rule of law and involve society at large. The Commission will spare no efforts to make the Partnership a success.

We also discussed our partnership in terms of the rule of law and the human rights. In a very detailed and constructive meeting together with Prime Minister Putin we have addressed these issues – the issues of human rights, fundamental freedoms, including some specific cases.

Strengthening the rule of law and fundamental freedoms is a shared commitment and we expect Russia to respect its international commitments in the field of human rights.

It is important that we keep an open, firm and constructive dialogue on these matters to make progress on these issues, not least because the rule of law is crucial for any modernization efforts.

We will therefore continue this work, not least in the dedicated Human Rights Consultations that we have with Russia. And once again I would like to thank Prime Minister Putin for the very open (I think around one hour) discussion we had on these matters where PM Putin was expressing to me the positions of Russia on these very sensitive issues.

We also agreed to give a further push to the negotiations on our Agreement.

We would like to see this agreement have substantial trade and investment provisions, including on energy. We believe this deal is critical to unlock the full potential of our relations. We should make progress soon, in the interest of our businesses and citizens.

In the same line, the Commission stressed its continued support for an early Russian accession to the WTO.

I welcome Prime Minister Putin's commitment on this. We hope that the multilateral negotiations will now be completed soon. I am confident that it will be possible to come to a final deal with the WTO soon.

Energy is a further key element of our relations and a good example of the importance of the constructive management of our shared economic interests. Yes, we have also had differences in the past, but we have also shown that we can solve issues together.

A substantive part of our discussions was precisely on energy. We discussed ways to make progress on the energy provisions. I also encouraged our sides to engage in more detailed discussions in some matters related to the Internal Market package for energy. I understand there are some concerns on the Russian side and in fact, Commissioner Oettinger and Minister Shmatko will sign several important documents today which demonstrate that our Energy Dialogue moves forward.

Another point where we were along the same lines was innovation, scientific and technical cooperation. We are speaking the same language there. We believe innovation and scientific technical cooperation can be extremely important for our joint interest and our economies.

On the visa issue, which is of great importance to Russia and the EU, we have launched joint work on a list of common steps towards a possible visa-free travel regime, as agreed last year. As soon as our Member States have agreed on the draft common steps, we will discuss these steps with Russia. We are also willing to launch negotiations on amending our visa facilitation agreement. I believe it is possible if there is good will from both sides to achieve progress on the visa issues.

The fruitful discussions today and the good atmosphere in which they were held show that our strategic partnership is delivering and that its momentum is growing.

Like good partners, we have discussed issues frankly, openly and constructively, including topics on which we may not agree completely.

But what I have seen in my talks with Prime Minister Putin, and also in the plenary meeting with the Russian government (I think 13 members of the government of Russia are with Prime Minister Putin and almost all Commissioners were there); what I have seen during this meeting, was a common willingness to make progress, the understanding that we have indeed strategic interests and in that spirit we will work to remove some of the obstacles and to make clear our common interests.

The Commission and I therefore look forward to continuing our work with Prime Minister Putin and his team. And once again thank you for coming to Brussels and to engaging in these very deep consultations.