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**Statement by High Representative Catherine Ashton
on the adoption of negotiating directives
for Association Agreements between
the EU and Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia**

Catherine Ashton, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission, made today the following statement:

"I welcome the adoption by the General Affairs Council on 10 May of the negotiating directives for the future Association Agreements between the EU and Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

The adoption of these negotiating directives is a clear sign of our strong commitment to further deepen the relationship between the EU and the countries of the South Caucasus, on the basis of shared values and principles, including democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights.

The Eastern Partnership, launched at the Prague Summit on 7 May 2009, provides an ambitious framework for taking the relationship with the countries of the South Caucasus to a new level. In this context, Association Agreements are an important instrument to upgrade our relations beyond existing commitments with a view of political association and gradual economic integration with the EU.

The negotiation process will be guided by the principles of inclusiveness and differentiation, as well as joint ownership. Successful implementation of the Eastern Partnership with the active engagement of the partner countries both in its multilateral and bilateral track will strengthen relations on the basis of shared values and will help advancing political and economic reforms, consolidate governance and foster regional stability, prosperity and confidence building.

I look forward to the launch of negotiations on these ambitious and comprehensive agreements with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia."

P R E S S

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