



Brussels, 14 March 2014

BACKGROUND¹
FOREIGN AFFAIRS COUNCIL
Monday 17 March 2014 in Brussels

The Council, starting at 9.30, will be chaired by Catherine Ashton, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

*The Council will kick-off with a debate on the situation in **Ukraine** and the EU's **Eastern Partnership** more generally. An exchange of views on **Bosnia and Herzegovina** will follow.*

*Ministers will then discuss how best to support on-going efforts in the **Middle East peace process**. The Council will then address developments related to the crisis in **Syria and its regional context**. After that, it will turn to the **EU-Africa summit**, to be held on 2/3 April in Brussels.*

*Over lunch, ministers will hold a discussion on **energy diplomacy**, in the presence of Energy Commissioner Günther Oettinger.*

The High Representative is also expected to shortly de-brief ministers on her recent visit to Iran, at the start of the meeting.

*The **EU-Uzbekistan Co-operation Council** will start at 16.30, chaired by the Greek Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Evangelos Venizelos (TV/photo opportunity at 17.30).*

Press conferences:

- after the Foreign Affairs Council (+/- 15.00)
- following the EU-Uzbekistan Co-operation Council (+/- 18.55)

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¹ This note has been drawn up under the responsibility of the press office

P R E S S

Ukraine and Eastern Partnership

The Council will take stock of developments in the Ukraine and follow-up on the extraordinary meeting of EU Heads of State and Government on 6 March and on the extraordinary FAC of 3 March. Ministers will discuss an EU response to the developments, ahead of a meeting of the European Council on 20/21 March. Wider issues related to the EU's Eastern Partnership may also be raised during the debate.

At their extraordinary meeting on 6 March, EU Heads of State or Government strongly condemned the violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity by the Russian Federation and called for an immediate withdrawal of armed forces to their areas of permanent stationing. They also considered the decision to hold a referendum on the future status of the Crimea contrary to the Ukrainian constitution and therefore illegal.

For the EU, the solution to the crisis in Ukraine must be based on the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine. Such a solution should be found through negotiations between Ukraine and the Russia federation, for instance through a so-called "contact group".

At the same time, leaders decided to take action. They suspended bilateral talks with the Russian Federation on visa matters as well as talks on a new EU-Russia agreement. European G8 members and the EU have also suspended their participation in the preparations for the G8 summit in June in Sochi.

Moreover, in the absence of talks between the governments of Ukraine and Russia and if they do not produce results in a limited timeframe, the EU will decide on additional measures, leaders stated. Preparatory work on such measures has been on-going.

Leaders also agreed that further steps by Russia to destabilise the situation in Ukraine would lead to additional and far reaching consequences for relations between the EU (and its member states) and the Russian Federation in a broad range of economic areas.

Heads of State and Government welcomed a package of support measures presented by the Commission last week, including overall support of at least € 11 billion over the coming years from the EU budget and EU-based international financial institutions. It also comprises the granting of autonomous trade preferences to Ukraine so as to advance the application of certain provisions of the Association Agreement on a deep and comprehensive free trade area.

Leaders in addition decided to sign very shortly the political chapters of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement while reiterating their commitment to sign the full agreement including the deep and comprehensive free trade area. See [statement by the Heads of State or Government](#) and [factsheet](#) on EU-Ukraine relations.

The Association Agreements with Moldova and Georgia were initialled at the Vilnius Eastern Partnership summit in November 2013. Their signature is to take place as soon as possible and before the end of August 2014. See [European Council conclusions](#) of December 2013 (para 47).

The EU's Eastern Partnership was launched at the Prague summit in May 2009. It concerns six Eastern partner countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Its objectives include accelerating political association and deepening economic integration with the Eastern European partner countries. The EU supports reforms in the partner countries aimed at consolidating democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and an open market economy. At the same time, it offers gradual integration into the European economy, greater mobility for citizens and closer political ties. Between 2010 and 2013, EUR 1.9 billion were allocated to support its implementation.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Council will discuss the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The High Representative will brief ministers about her recent trip to Sarajevo where she discussed the situation with politicians and members of civil society. See her [statement](#) at the conclusion of the trip.

In October 2013, the Council expressed its serious concern at the on-going failure of the Bosnia and Herzegovina political leaders to implement the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights in the Sejdić/Finci case and stressed that the current lack of a solution is preventing Bosnia and Herzegovina from further progress towards the EU. It also reiterated its unequivocal support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU perspective as a sovereign and united country enjoying full territorial integrity. See [Council conclusions](#).

Middle East peace process

The Council will discuss the Middle East peace process. The High Representative will brief ministers on what the EU can do to support the talks.

The EU fully supports the on-going efforts of the parties and of the US. In December 2013, the Council reiterated the EU's readiness to contribute substantially to post-conflict arrangements for ensuring the sustainability of a peace agreement. "*The EU will provide an unprecedented package of European political, economic and security support to both parties in the context of a final status agreement,*" the Council said in conclusions. The on-going work to define the details of the EU's offer will be the subject of the debate by ministers. See [Council conclusions of 16 December 2013](#).

Syrian conflict and regional context

The Council will consider the latest developments in the Syrian conflict, in particular the humanitarian situation following the adoption of a UN Security Council resolution on the humanitarian situation on 22 February, the growing terrorist threat and the state of play in diplomatic efforts to bring an end to the crisis.

For the EU, the only solution to the conflict is a genuine political transition, based on the full implementation of the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012, and preserving the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria.

The EU and its member states have been quick to support the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons. The EU is the largest financial contributor to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and supports its work towards the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile, including through the provision of armoured vehicles and satellite imagery. Individual member states have also provided resources to assist the destruction programme.

The EU and its member states are the largest humanitarian donor for the Syrian crisis. The total response from EU and member states to the crisis stands now at € 2.6 billion.

For more details on EU positions and restrictive measures, see [factsheet European Union and Syria](#).

EU-Africa summit

The Council will be briefed about preparations for the 4th EU-Africa summit, which is to take place in Brussels on the 2-3 April under the theme "Investing in people, prosperity and peace". The European Council of 20/21 March will also discuss the summit preparations.

The EU-Africa summit will bring together the Heads of State and Government of the European Union and the African continent, together with the EU and African Union institutions. It will illustrate how EU-Africa relations have evolved over the past years, based on the Joint Africa-EU Strategy of 2007, which established a partnership of equals going beyond development to tackle challenges of common interest, including political, economic, investment and trade issues.

Leaders will discuss ways to deepen co-operation under the three areas identified in the summit theme, i.e. people, prosperity and peace. They will also address investment, climate change, prosperity, and ways for stimulating growth and create jobs, and will take stock of ongoing and future cooperation in the various fields covered by the Joint Africa-EU Strategy. The issue of migration as well as peace and security cooperation will also be on the agenda.

For more information, see the [website of the EU-Africa summit](#).

Energy diplomacy

Over lunch, ministers will exchange views on EU energy diplomacy, in the presence of Energy Commissioner Günther Oettinger. Ministers are set to discuss the foreign policy implications of strategic choices made in the field of energy by relevant partners.

The shift in the global energy landscape creates new challenges and opportunities for EU foreign and security policy. The shale gas revolution in the US, the growing demand for energy in India due to its increasing population and the rise of gas as a source in China might have far-reaching political and economic consequences.

The debate follows previous exchanges among EU leaders and ministers about the external dimension of EU energy policy. The European Council of February 2011 asked the High Representative to take full account of the energy security dimension in her work and to reflect energy security in the EU's neighbourhood policy.

Other items

The Council is set to adopt several other items without discussion, including:

- European aid volunteers initiative

The Council is set to establish a European voluntary humanitarian aid corps which sets out a framework for joint contributions from European volunteers to support and complement humanitarian aid operations worldwide, as provided for in the Lisbon Treaty. See also [legal text](#).

- Gulf of Guinea

The Council is due to adopt an EU strategy on the Gulf of Guinea, to support the efforts of the region and its coastal states to address the many challenges of maritime insecurity and organised crime. EU action will focus on four objectives: building a common understanding of the scale of the threat in the Gulf of Guinea and the need to address it; helping regional governments put in place institutions and capabilities to ensure security and the rule of law; supporting the development of prosperous economies in the coastal countries; strengthening cooperation structures between the countries of the region to ensure effective action across borders at sea and on land. The Council is to invite the EEAS and the Commission to put forward the actions necessary to deliver the strategy and report back annually on progress made.

- EU strategy for security and development in the Sahel

The Council is to adopt conclusions on the implementation of the EU strategy for security and development in the Sahel. The Council is set to welcome the progress made in implementing the strategy that it adopted in March 2011 and reaffirm the EU's objectives in the fields of security, development, peace-building, conflict prevention and countering violent extremism. It will invite the Commission and the EEAS to extend the implementation of the strategy to Burkina Faso and Chad while intensifying activities in Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

- EUCAP Mali

The Council is likely to adopt a crisis management concept for a civilian mission under the Common Security and Defence Policy to assist the internal security forces in Mali (EUCAP Mali) so as to enable the Malian state to ensure law and order as well as fight against terrorists, organised crime and cross-border trafficking. Once established, EUCAP Mali would deliver strategic advice and training for managers of the three internal security forces in Mali, i.e. the police, *Gendarmerie* and *Garde nationale*. A separate legal act - currently under preparation - is required for the mission to be formally set up.

- West Africa EPA development programme

The Council is set to adopt conclusions on West Africa's Economic Partnership Agreement development programme (PAPED). In the period from 2015 to 2020, the EU is committed to provide at least € 6.5 billion for activities linked to the PAPED. This is to be delivered through the European Development Fund, relevant instruments of the EU budget, contributions from member states and the European Investment Bank. See [draft Council conclusions](#).

- South Sudan

The Council is to adopt conclusions on South Sudan, expressing its deep concern about the ongoing crisis in South Sudan, the grave human suffering it causes and its regional implications. It will call on all parties to immediately stop the violence and honour the Cessation of Hostilities agreement signed on 23 January. The EU firmly supports the mediation led by the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development.

- Central African Republic

The Council is due to adopt conclusions on the Central African Republic, encouraging the current authorities to continue the political transition. The EU is the main humanitarian and development partner of the Central African Republic. For more information, see [fact sheet](#).
