

**Opening Remarks and Answers by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at
Joint Press Conference Following Talks with Catherine Ashton, EU High
Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/European Commission
Vice President, Moscow, November 17, 2011**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today we held a regular meeting of the Russia-EU Permanent Partnership Council, confirming that this format allows us most fully in the context of all aspects of our cooperation to exchange views on issues to be addressed. This is a useful exercise, especially in preparation for the next summit between our country and the European Union, which will be held in December in Brussels.

For each of the four common spaces, we outlined specific steps which in the remaining period before the summit will help prepare additional practical suggestions to move forward our strategic partnership. We have significant achievements in each of the four roadmaps. We have a reciprocal desire to move forward without slowing the pace. It is important that, despite the global financial and economic instability, in our interaction there is progress being made, the strategic partnership is strengthened and the development of our relations is marked by positive dynamics. I would like to highlight the agreement reached on the List of Common Steps towards visa-free short-term travel for citizens of Russia and the EU. We agreed to do everything so that this list is approved at the summit in Brussels.

We expressed our appreciation to our colleagues for their work and active support of Russia's accession to the WTO. We presume that this will be a turning point in our trade and investment cooperation, taking it to a qualitatively new level. We hope that this will significantly expedite the work on a new framework agreement on strategic partnership between Russia and the EU, and have it completed in the foreseeable future.

We also reviewed the progress of the joint initiative Partnership for Modernization. We noted the need to facilitate the convergence of our economies and to improve their competitiveness through collaborative research, development and innovation activities involving the business circles of Russia and the EU.

We find it encouraging that the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and Vnesheconombank agreed on significant amounts of funding for collaborative projects that are being discussed with the participation of businessmen and officials from Moscow and Brussels.

We devote particular attention to the further development of our strategic dialogue on energy. November 8th saw the commissioning of the first stage of the Nord Stream gas pipeline, which really opens a new chapter in Russia's partnership with the EU. We are interested in seeing that our energy partnership is further replenished by mutually beneficial and promising projects in terms of reinforcing Europe's energy security. We discuss the problems that exist in this interaction, including the rules for

implementing in individual EU countries, the so-called third energy package. We discussed the situation around the idea of building the so called trans-Caspian gas pipeline.

We hope that discussions on these topics will continue in order to reach mutually acceptable agreements that meet the interests of the sides and are based on legal realities.

We devote considerable attention to cooperation in the framework of creating a common space of external security. We talked about cooperation in crisis management and about the reinforcement of the regulatory framework of our cooperation. We cooperate with the EU in the settlement of many conflicts and crises, both in Europe and elsewhere. We work closely together to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue, and interact in the Middle East Quartet, within the G8 framework and in many other formats.

I presume that this work is in the fundamental interests of Russia and all countries which are part of the EU. It is in our interest, which was today confirmed, to continue to move in this direction to find solutions to the issues still unresolved. We have reason to expect that this collaboration will develop steadily and effectively. I thank Catherine Ashton for the cooperation and give her the floor.

Question (addressed to Ashton and Lavrov): What is the situation with the introduction of a visa-free regime between Russia and the EU in the context of the recent statements by Moscow on the need to link the adoption of the List of Common Steps to a bilateral statement on the immediate start of negotiations on a visa-free regime?

Foreign Minister Lavrov (speaks after Ashton): I agree that we have the opportunity to fix a serious, real, long-awaited achievement. The List of Common Steps took painstaking and long effort. Now we've got a complete document, endorsed by the negotiators, which we hope will be supported at the summit in Brussels. At least we agreed to recommend that our leaders do just that. We also agreed that after these "common steps" are implemented, talks will begin to conclude an agreement on visa-free short-term trips for citizens of Russia and the EU. This will be done in line with the internal procedures of each party. As explained by Catherine Ashton, the European Commission will ask the European Council for a mandate for such negotiations. Russia will be able to start negotiations on a visa-free agreement on the basis of the appropriate decisions of the President and Government of Russia. We have no misunderstandings on this issue. Necessary arrangements will be made and they will be announced at the summit in Brussels. That is our common position. And we are going to recommend this to the leaders of our countries.

Question (addressed to Sergey Lavrov and Ashton): Is there a mutual understanding between you on how to persuade Iran to answer the questions of the international community over its nuclear program? Do you agree with the need to send IAEA experts there? Is Russia's step by step initiative a response to the reports

of the IAEA? And will this initiative help encourage Iran to answer questions on its nuclear program?

Foreign Minister Lavrov (speaks first): We are closely engaged in dealing with this issue. The P5+1 is working intensively. Ashton, as the coordinator of the group communicates regularly with representatives of Iran, in particular with the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of the country, Saeed Jalili. Recently, Ashton on behalf of the Group sent a message expressing our common position with the proposal on the resumption of dialogue between Iran and the P5+1 without preconditions.

We call for Iran to closely and fully cooperate with IAEA experts. We noted as a positive fact that IAEA Deputy Director General Herman Nackaerts and his team in August during their visit to Iran got access to a number of sites where previously Agency inspectors had not been invited. We also know that Iran has once again invited the IAEA's delegation to visit to discuss outstanding issues. Such contacts we support.

As a positive momentum I'll also note that the representatives of the P5+1 in the Board of Governors of the IAEA agreed at the meeting of this body now being held, a resolution that is being submitted for its consideration. We hope that it will be adopted tomorrow. The resolution is well balanced and reflects the collective approaches of the P5+1, based on verified facts, and does not contain questionable speculative assessments and conclusions. It calls on Iran and the IAEA to intensify their joint work. The resolution refers to the invitation of Tehran, addressed to the IAEA's delegation, supports the position set out in the letter of Ashton to the Iranian leadership and welcomes the disposition of the P5+1 to seek a settlement of the Iranian nuclear issue through negotiation.

I'm sure that now comes the opportune moment to intensify the dialogue. This needs greater cooperation. We expect that Iran, having sown the seeds of hope associated with its invitation to the IAEA delegation for a serious conversation, will justify it. We are convinced that only through dialogue and negotiations, while ensuring the reliability of the nuclear nonproliferation regime and respect for the rights and duties of members of the NPT, is it possible to solve the Iranian nuclear issue. Achieving such an outcome in the foreseeable future would be the best response to attempts to inflate the fears in the media and to shift the situation from the negotiation path to a direct confrontation with threats, sanctions and the use of military force. For us this is unacceptable. We will firmly work for the strict implementation of the agreements reached, which presuppose a peaceful, political settlement of existing issues.

Question (addressed to Ashton): Is Syria now on the verge of civil war?

Foreign Minister Lavrov (speaks after Ashton): We believe that all violence must be stopped. We have advocated for this since the first days of the Syrian drama and actively worked to stop the violence. We worked directly with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, to whom Russian President Dmitry Medvedev appealed directly,

encouraging him to accelerate reforms and intensify the dialogue with the opposition. We also worked on other levels. And we have always emphasized that the cessation of violence requires pressure on all parties involved in these dramatic events.

Along with peaceful protesters, whose aspirations and demands we understand and support (that's why we urge the parties to start dialogue as soon as possible), groups of armed men are increasingly becoming involved in these events that have a different agenda than reform and democracy in Syria. Their tasks are based on interethnic and inter-clan interests. These people have received and continue to, unfortunately, receive arms in increasing quantities from neighboring countries. No one hides these facts anymore. Via illegal channels arms keep flowing through Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan. Today Euronews showed footage of the newly formed so-called "free Syrian army" attacking a government building. If the opposition will follow such practices, this will lead, as has been said here, to a full civil war.

We have actively supported the Arab League initiative adopted on November 2. It provides for cessation of violence from whatever quarter, the sending to Syria of observers from Arab countries to monitor the situation and assess it objectively, and the early start of dialogue. Russia has supported all aspects of this initiative. We invited all countries that have influence either on the Syrian government or opposition groups, especially those based in France, the US and Turkey, to make a unanimous appeal to the Syrian government and opposition groups to stop violence. This should be done simultaneously so that no one provokes disturbances and no one reacts inadequately and disproportionately. It is then that you need to send observers to Syria. By their presence, they will produce a stabilizing effect and evaluate who fulfills this requirement and who does not. We believe that the proposal to start a dialogue must be accepted by all. Syrian parties should meet at Arab League headquarters in Cairo. If some opposition representatives, with support from some foreign countries, declare that dialogue can begin only after President al-Assad goes, then the Arab League initiative becomes worthless and meaningless, for it exactly encourages the Syrian government to take definite steps, beginning with a dialogue.

We watch how hastily external players are trying to form a confrontation in Syria. This is, apparently, in order to dramatize the situation in the media space and to get additional arguments to justify interference in Syrian affairs. Although in words all deny this, but, according to our feelings, someone has such plans.

The situation is evolving rapidly. On November 2 the Arab League initiative was adopted, and a couple of days later from some European capitals, we heard statements that it was "dead." A check to see if Syria is in compliance was carried out by some Arab countries just ten days after the adoption of the document. Everything moves along an ascending line. We would not want matters to follow the Libyan scenario.

Pay attention to another country in the region, Yemen, where, unfortunately, people are dying, probably, no less than is the case in Syria. There is also a plan of the Arab Gulf countries there, but no one sets any ultimatum-like deadlines. Everyone, including the US, EU, Gulf states, Arab League, Russia and China are working to

create conditions for the implementation of the plan for a peaceful settlement and national reconciliation. Everyone understands how detrimental it would be to let things run out of control and face the threat of disintegration of Yemen.

I do not understand why some countries do not have the same understanding regarding Syria and the most devastating consequences of the country's collapse due to a probable civil war. I hope that responsible politicians will pursue the initiatives put forward by the Arab League and do so with the knowledge that for a cessation of violence, provocations must also stop. You can't let things drift. We will try to achieve just such a responsible approach by all players.

In regard to reforms and the organization of national dialogue, the actions of the Syrian authorities also need to be clearer and more resolute. We cannot say that nothing is done. Legislation on political parties, elections, local government has been updated; local elections are set for December and national elections, simultaneously with the reform of the constitution, for February. The process goes on, and the opposition must not boycott it. If bets are placed only on the expectation that foreign countries will help bring down the regime, such an approach is totally irresponsible. We already saw this in Libya, where, unfortunately, the situation is far from calming down. We would not want a recurrence of the same in Syria. We will seek responsible positions on the part of all participants in this process.