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## Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union

## Permanent Council No. 717 19 June 2008

## EU statement in response to the Head of the OSCE Office in Minsk, Ambassador Hans-Jochen Schmidt

The European Union warmly welcomes Ambassador Hans-Jochen Schmidt on the occasion of his first appearance before the Permanent Council and thanks him for his comprehensive report.

The EU highly appreciates and supports the work of the OSCE Office in Minsk in assisting Belarus to meet its OSCE commitments. Support to the government and civil society remains critical in the areas of democratic institution building, consolidating the rule of law and the protection of human rights. The EU also values the Office's economic and environmental activities. We therefore encourage the Office to continue to pursue programmatic activities in all the areas provided for in its mandate including monitoring of and reporting on the development of an open civil society.

The EU notes the assessment by Ambassador Schmidt that the Belarusian government's approach to the project registration process has slightly improved recently. We hope that the remaining project proposals for 2007 as well as those for 2008 will be registered in good time by the Belarusian authorities. In this context the EU wishes to stress again that OSCE Missions should be able to implement programmes and projects without bureaucratic hindrance in all areas defined in their mandates, thus assisting the host governments to implement their OSCE commitments.



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The European Union highly values the contacts between the Office and civil society. We welcome the fact that the charges against the Belarus Helsinki Committee were suspended recently. At the same time, we recall that these charges have not yet been lifted. We remain concerned about continuing reports of restrictions, intimidation and harassment of NGOs, human rights defenders and political activists. This includes cases of unwarranted pre-emptive detention, drastic increases of office rents for NGO's as well as travel bans.

The European Union continues to follow closely developments regarding political prisoners in Belarus. We considered the release of five internationally recognised political prisoners at the beginning of this year as a positive step. Unfortunately, the situation has deteriorated recently with the severe sentencing by Belarusian courts of Syarhei Parsyukevich and Andrei Kim as well as of a number of youth activists over their participation in a peaceful demonstration.

The European Union notes with regret that the overall situation with regard to the freedom of the media in Belarus has not improved. Independent newspapers covering political issues, which comprise only a small percentage of all printed mass media, continue to face serious difficulties, for instance with registration and distribution. Equally worrisome are reports of harassment of journalists connected to foreign media. We therefore call on the Belarusian authorities to honour their commitment to a pluralistic development of the media. We call on them to continue their cooperation with the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Miklos Haraszti, including by giving due consideration to the comments and recommendations provided by his Office with regard to the draft law "On Mass Media" which is currently under consideration in the Belarusian National Assembly.



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The increasing number of political prisoners, the continuing imprisonment of former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin, the harassment of civil society and independent media as well as coercive measures taken against the US Embassy in Belarus are amongst the issues that hinder the renewal of a constructive and mutually beneficial dialogue between the European Union and Belarus.

The EU reiterates that it would consider the unconditional release of all remaining political prisoners in Belarus as a concrete step towards Belarusian compliance with core European values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. This would provide for the possibility to review the restrictive measures in place against certain Belarusian officials, and would enable the EU, which has repeatedly indicated its willingness to develop constructive relations with Belarus, to progressively re-engage with Minsk, in connection with further steps by Belarus in that direction.

The upcoming Parliamentary elections provide an important opportunity in this regard. The EU calls on Belarus to conduct these elections in a free and fair manner in accordance with international standards and in line with its OSCE commitments. The EU expects Belarus to issue a timely invitation to observe the elections and to cooperate fully with the ODIHR.

Finally, the EU would like to express its appreciation to Ambassador Schmidt and his dedicated team for their excellent work under sometimes challenging circumstances and wish them all success in their future endeavours.

The candidate countries Turkey, Croatia\* and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia\*, the countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidate countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia, the European Free Trade Association country and member of the European Economic Area Iceland, as well as Ukraine and Georgia align themselves with this statement.



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\* Croatia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process