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EU Statement on Belarus

The EU notes with great concern that the distribution of a number of independent Belarusian periodicals, including *Narodnaya Volya*, *Salidarnasts* and *Zhoda*, will be seriously limited in 2006 following the decision to exclude them from the Belposhta subscription catalogue. We believe that this is yet another measure aimed at restricting access to free and independent media sources in Belarus.

The lack of respect for media freedom and freedom of expression in Belarus remains a matter of great concern to the EU. We have regularly called on the Belarusian authorities to refrain from their discriminatory policy towards independent media. We therefore very much regret that the situation continues to worsen.

Freedom of expression and freedom of the media are fundamental components of any democratic society, as enshrined in the OSCE's human dimension commitments. The EU encourages the development of a free media and supports the Representative on Freedom of the Media in his efforts to improve the situation. The EU would encourage the Government of Belarus to accept the offers of assistance made by the Representative in his report on his visit to Belarus in February of this year. The EU also underlines the indispensable role of the free and independent media in the election process.

The EU once again urges Belarus to honour its OSCE commitments on freedom of the media. We also call on Belarus to remove legal and administrative obstacles which hinder the work of independent media and, as a result, the public's access to it.

The Acceding Countries Bulgaria and Romania, the Candidate Countries Turkey and Croatia¹, the Countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidates, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, EFTA countries Iceland and Norway, members of the European Economic Area, as well as Ukraine align themselves with this declaration.

¹ Croatia continues to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process