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EU STATEMENT ON BELARUS

The EU has repeatedly called on the Belarusian authorities to change their hostile attitude towards the civil society. On many occasions, the EU has expressed its concern over the disrespect for the basic democratic principles and the violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms in Belarus. Regrettably, we continue to witness further deterioration of the situation.

The EU notes with deep concern the further intensified harassment of the independent media, as evidenced by recent steps against newspapers such as Narodnaya Volya, Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta and Z'hoda.

The EU is also concerned about the recent arrests of members of opposition parties on various accusations. In this regard, the EU expects that the charges against Mr. Screbets, a former member of the House of Representatives of the Belarusian National Assembly, who was arrested on May 15, and Mr. Klimov, arrested on 22 April, will be properly investigated, so as to ensure a fair treatment. We will also closely monitor the proceedings against Mr. Statkevitch and Mr. Severinets who will be summoned to court on 23 May. The EU will continue to follow carefully the situation of Mr. Marinich.

Freedom of expression and assembly have been hampered by the harassment of individuals who expressed a critical opinion on the situation in Belarus. The EU is disturbed by the information that several students and representatives of youth organisations are currently facing difficulties as a result of their participation in peaceful gatherings.

Administrative and bureaucratic regulations and practices are used as tools to restrict the activities of the political opposition and NGOs. A recent case in point concerns the action taken against the Union of Poles in Belarus, the biggest NGO in the country. Another clear example of such harassment practices is the requirements in the Housing Code relating to legal addresses. They seriously threaten the existence and operational abilities of many organizations and hereby effectively deny people their freedom of association. The EU notes that on June 1 the deadline for public associations to meet the provisions of the Housing Code will expire. The EU is concerned that the application of this Code will lead to the liquidation of many NGOs. This would further weaken Belarusian civil society, which has been systematically repressed in recent months and years. The EU therefore calls on the Belarusian authorities to reconsider urgently the current regulations in order to enable the associations concerned to continue their work.

The EU once again urges the Belarusian authorities to live up to their OSCE commitments regarding democratic standards and to create the conditions necessary for the development of an open and pluralistic society in Belarus.

The Acceding Countries Bulgaria and Romania and the Candidate Countries Turkey and Croatia¹ align themselves with this statement.

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