

ENGLISH only

Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union**Permanent Council No. 596
9 March 2006****EU statement on Belarus**

Mr Chairman, let me share with the Permanent Council a Presidency Declaration on the pre-election situation in Belarus, issued yesterday:

"The European Union is very concerned about the situation in the run-up to the 19 March Presidential elections in Belarus and the continuing deterioration of the human rights situation in the country. Therefore, the European Union calls on the Belarusian authorities to take all necessary steps in order to assure a free and fair electoral process.

The European Union welcomes the emergence of democratically selected politicians in Belarusian civil society who are determined to give their fellow citizens an alternative choice for the future of their country. The European Union is dismayed by reports of serious violations of candidates' campaigning rights in the run-up to the Presidential elections, and the intimidation, detention and violence against one candidate in particular, as occurred on 2 March 2006. Detention of campaign activists, searches of campaign offices, confiscation of campaign materials and interruption of campaign meetings were documented in the interim report of the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission of 1 March 2006. The European Union firmly condemns these acts and once again calls on the Belarusian authorities to abide by international standards and Belarus' commitments in the OSCE and the UN frameworks to ensure equal campaigning rights for all candidates.

The European Union also urges the responsible Belarusian authorities to allow the Belarusian people to exercise fully their right of assembly and freedom of expression and to take all the necessary means to guarantee the personal security of peaceful demonstrators and all Presidential candidates.

As stated in the Council Conclusions of 7 November 2005 and 30 January 2006, the European Union will continue monitoring the situation in Belarus closely and will take further restrictive measures against the responsible individuals if the elections are not conducted according to international standards and in line with Belarus' commitments in the OSCE."

1. Mr Chairman, we have noted with satisfaction that the OSCE/ODIHR Elections Observation Mission has been deployed in Belarus following the invitation by the Belarusian authorities. We reiterate our full confidence in and support for the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission in Belarus and we welcome its first Interim Report issued on March 1. However, a number of related matters remain of concern to us:
2. The EU is deeply disturbed by attempts to eliminate the activities of domestic observers. In this regard, the EU once again deplores the measures taken against the NGOs Partnership and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, which have in the past played a major role in domestic election observation.
3. The EU furthermore regrets that whilst media coverage of the incumbent President's campaign is extensive, the coverage of the other candidates' activities is only limited. We are dismayed by the censorship of the radio and TV addresses of Mr. Kozulin and Mr. Milinkevich. We are also seriously concerned about the confiscation of all 250.000 copies of the special edition of the independent newspaper Narodnaya Volya with photographs showing the beating of Mr Kozulin.
4. Journalists of several EU Member States who planned to cover the Belarusian campaign have encountered difficulties in obtaining visas and accreditations. Therefore, the EU calls on the authorities of Belarus to refrain from such restrictions and to make all necessary efforts to guarantee the freedom of the media to cover the 19 March election, in full compliance with OSCE commitments and standards.
5. We are alarmed by threats made against Western Embassies and attempts to intimidate diplomats from EU Member States. The EU reminds Belarus that it is closely monitoring the situation and will not hesitate to take appropriate action.

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

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