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EU Statement on Belarus

In the course of last year the European Union made a number of statements on Belarus in which it repeatedly expressed its grave concern about the lack of respect for the OSCE commitments in Belarus and highlighted the dramatically deteriorating situation in the area of human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law. Time and again, the EU has been calling on the Belarusian authorities to change the course of their actions, and adhere to the spirit and letter of democratic principles that were reconfirmed in the Astana Declaration. Unfortunately, so far without results.

The latest reason for concern relates to the freedom of the media and free access to information in Belarus. The EU joins the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media in condemning the sentencing of Ales Barazhenka, an independent Belarusian cameraman, to 11 days' imprisonment for covering an unsanctioned event in Minsk. We remain deeply concerned about the constant harassment of journalists in Belarus, who are frequently victims of intimidation and threats, physical attacks, arrest, damage or confiscation of their equipment. The EU urges the Belarusian authorities to stop the harassment and persecution of journalists and to ensure that they can freely carry out their activities.

The EU takes note of the widespread and to a large extent, open debate on the internet in Belarus. The EU notes amendments to internet regulations introduced

at the beginning of the year, and hopes that this will not have a negative impact on the freedom of expression and free access to information online.

The EU reiterates its call on Belarus to immediately release and rehabilitate all political prisoners and to stop the harassment of members of the opposition and civil society.

The EU hopes that this year our dialogue and interaction with Belarus, including within the Permanent Council, will be fruitful and lead to concrete results.

The acceding country CROATIA*, the candidate countries THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA, MONTENEGRO and ICELAND**, the countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidates countries ALBANIA, BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA and SERBIA, the European Free Trade Association countries LIECHTENSTEIN and NORWAY, members of the European Economic Area align themselves with this statement.

*Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Montenegro continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

**Iceland continues to be a member of EFTA and the European Economic Area.