

Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union**Permanent Council No. 612****8 June 2006****EU Statement on Belarus**

1. The European Union would like to draw delegations' attention to the following declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the European Union on the request of the Belarusian Ministry of Justice to suspend the activities of the Belarus Helsinki Committee, which was issued on 1 June:

"In a Presidency declaration of 4 January 2006, the European Union expressed its disappointment at the decision of the Belarus Supreme Economic Court to reinstate penalties against the Belarus Helsinki Committee (BHC).

The European Union is therefore very concerned at the request put on 24 May 2006 by the Belarusian Ministry of Justice to the Supreme Court of the Republic of Belarus to suspend the activities of the Belarus Helsinki Committee for alleged tax evasion and other charges which appear to be politically motivated.

The EU calls upon the Belarusian authorities to immediately cease their campaign of harassment against the BHC which would lead to the closure of the only remaining registered Human rights NGO in Belarus. The EU also urges the Belarusian authorities to withdraw without delay the charges levelled against the BHC in order to comply with Belarus' international commitments.

The EU recalls that as a beneficiary of the TACIS programme, the BHC is exempt from taxation and custom duties as stipulated by the framework agreement signed between the EC and Belarus in 1994.

The European Union restates its full support for the work of the BHC which plays an important role in promoting human rights in Belarus. It looks forward to continued cooperation with them.

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, and the EFTA countries Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, members of the European Economic Area, as well as Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova align themselves with this declaration.”

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