



German Presidency of the Council of the European Union

**662<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of the Permanent Council**

**26 April 2007**

Statement of the European Union in response to the Head of  
the OSCE Office in Minsk, Ambassador Åke Peterson

Mr. Chairman, as we just mentioned in our statement in response to H.E., the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, today is a special day not least for Belarus. The accident of 26 April 1986 at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant heavily affected Belarus which received over 70 percent of the radioactive fallout. Belarus and its people continue to face serious problems due to this contamination. The European Union and its Member States have been giving considerable assistance to alleviate the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster.

Also on 26 April Belarusian civil society traditionally holds the “Path of Chernobyl” march in Minsk to commemorate this tragic accident and its long term consequences. This brings me to the report just presented by the Head of the OSCE Office in Minsk. The European Union warmly welcomes Ambassador Åke Peterson to the Permanent Council and thanks him for his comprehensive report.

The EU highly appreciates the work of the Office. We remain fully convinced that the Office makes a valuable contribution to the social and economic development of the host country. We encourage the Office to continue to carry out all the tasks defined in its mandate including monitoring and reporting which we regard as an important tool.

We note that most of the Office’s project proposals for 2006 have at last been registered. We hope that the project proposals for 2007 currently under consideration will soon be agreed upon in the working groups and be registered in good time by the Belarusian authorities. In this context the EU wishes to stress again that OSCE

Missions should be able to implement programmes and projects without bureaucratic hindrance in all areas defined in their mandates, thus assisting the host governments to implement their OSCE commitments.

The European Union values highly the contacts between the Office and civil society. The EU considers a vibrant civil society as very important for the development of Belarus. We welcome the fact that the Belarus Helsinki Committee can continue its activities. At the same time we remain concerned about continuing reports of restrictions, intimidation and harassment of NGOs and human rights activists in Belarus including cases of unwarranted pre-emptive detention.

We welcome the seminar “Exploring the Opportunities for Belarus within the European Neighbourhood Policy” conducted on 15 March 2007 by the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus in which representatives of political parties, NGOs and independent media participated.

The European Union notes with regret that the overall situation with regard to the freedom of the media in Belarus has not improved. Independent newspapers covering political issues continue to face serious difficulties while often state-owned media reporting of internal political developments and of political opponents is biased. We therefore call on the Belarusian authorities to honour their commitment to a pluralistic development of the media and remain convinced that the OSCE Office in Minsk, as well as the OSCE Representative of the Freedom of the Media, Miklos Haraszti, can provide valuable support in this regard. We hope that the upcoming visit of Mr. Haraszti to Belarus will be helpful.

Mr. Chairman, the European Union has on numerous occasions expressed its concern about the respect for basic democratic principles, human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law in Belarus. In connection with the demonstration on 25 March 2007 in Minsk we called upon Belarus to allow its citizens to exercise their right to assemble peacefully and express their views without harassment and interference. We therefore hope that today’s “Path of Chernobyl” march in Minsk will take place without impediment.

The European Union continues to follow closely developments regarding political prisoners in Belarus. On 8 November 2006 the EU expressed its deep concern about

the sentencing of Dmitry (Zmitser) Dashkevich, a member of the Belarusian youth organization “Malady Front” (Young Front) to 18 months' imprisonment. Today we have to mention five other activists of Malady Front who are facing the same criminal charge of acting on behalf of an unregistered organization. We are equally concerned about the fate of Andrey Klimov. This opposition politician was released last December after having served an 18month sentence for organizing an opposition demonstration in Minsk. On 3 April 2007 he was rearrested. This time he is facing a charge under Article 361 of the Criminal Code which outlaws calls via the media for the overthrow of the government or changes to the constitutional system of Belarus. The European Union calls on Belarus to release all political prisoners, including former presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin. We regard the personal meeting which Ambassador Peterson and the German Ambassador acting as local EU Presidency had with Mr. Kozulin in prison on 20 April as a first step in the right direction.

Mr. Chairman, the European Union reiterates that it stands ready to renew its relationship with Belarus, as soon as the Belarusian government demonstrates its respect for democratic values and for the fundamental rights of the Belarusian people. At the same time the EU is determined to continue to support the people and the civil society in Belarus. The EU is confident that the Delegation of the European Commission to Belarus can be opened soon in Minsk.

Finally, the EU would like to express its highest appreciation to Ambassador Peterson and his dedicated team for their excellent work and wish them success in their future endeavours.

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, Montenegro, and Serbia, EFTA countries Iceland and Norway, members of the European Economic Area, as well as Ukraine align themselves with this statement.

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