

Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union

**Permanent Council No. 595
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EU statement on Belarus

1. The EU remains concerned at the continuing deterioration in the human rights situation in Belarus.
2. We are dismayed to learn of the detention of the four Belarusian civil society activists Timofei Dranchuk, Nikolai Astreika, Aleksei Shalaiko and Enira Bronitskaya. The EU views these arrests as a pre-emptive move designed to prevent them from organizing domestic election observation and as a provocative action against NGOs in order to discredit them. The EU calls for the release of these detainees and condemns continuing Belarusian government pressure on civil society. The EU would also like to express its concern at the sentencing of opposition figure Syarhey Skrabets on 14 February to 2 ½ years in prison for allegedly misusing a state credit. The EU is also deeply concerned by the sentencing of Evgueni Afanagel, president of the youth organisation "Zoubr", to 15 days in jail for alleged "hooliganism".
3. The EU has on several occasions deplored the negative attitude of the Belarusian authorities towards the Belarusian Helsinki Committee and in particular the re-opening of the case against the BHC for alleged tax evasion relating to TACIS grants. The EU believes that this is a politically motivated attack which is seriously harming the activities of BHC, one of the last remaining independent NGOs in Belarus in advance of the 2006 presidential election. We urge the Belarusian authorities to cease this harassment and to allow this important independent NGO to freely function. The cases of the four Belarusian civil society activists and the BHC are part of a continuing trend of suppressing civil society by the Government of Belarus.

4. Mr. Chairman, let me now turn to one related issue. The EU has taken note of the criticism expressed by one OSCE participating State about the preparations for observation of Presidential elections in Belarus. The EU does not share these assessments. This preparation is carried out with the greatest transparency and impartiality by an experienced team which deserves our confidence and support. The EU will return to this issue in detail at a later stage.

5. The EU calls on the Belarusian authorities to ensure that the Presidential elections on 19 March are conducted in a free and fair manner and will continue to closely monitor the situation in Belarusian.

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, 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 continues to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process