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EU Statement in response to the report by the Head of the OSCE Office in Minsk, Ambassador Hans-Jochen Schmidt

The European Union warmly welcomes Ambassador Schmidt back to the Permanent Council and thanks him for his comprehensive report.

The EU values and supports the work of the OSCE Office in Minsk aimed at assisting Belarus to meet its OSCE commitments. We underline the importance of the Office increasing its co-operation with both state institutions and civil society. We encourage the Office to continue its activities in all the areas provided for in its mandate including monitoring of and reporting on important developments in civil society and the media.

With regard to project registration the EU calls upon the Belarusian authorities to further simplify and accelerate this process in order to allow for an effective project implementation. In this context the EU welcomes the recent registration of an NGO project aimed at increased interaction between state institutions and civil society in Belarus.

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In the Human Dimension the EU appreciates the Office's efforts to implement projects, including by increasingly involving NGOs into its activities. The EU hopes that the Belarusian authorities will soon approve proposals presented by the Office to organize roundtables on "Freedom of Assembly and Association" as well as on the "Electoral Law".

In the Economic and Environmental Dimension the EU welcomes the intention of the Office to support economic reforms towards Belarus' transition to a market economy. We encourage the Office to include, whenever possible, representatives of the civil society into its activities also in this Dimension.

In general, the European Union attaches great importance to a further intensification of its relations with Belarus. We therefore hope that the Belarusian leadership will take positive steps in key areas as outlined in the General Affairs and External Relations Council Conclusions on Belarus of 13 October 2008 and 16 March 2009. The EU expects Belarus to reform its Electoral Code to bring it into line with OSCE commitments. It also hopes for more concrete action by Belarus towards the respect of democratic values, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of expression and of the media, and the freedom of assembly and political association. Such measures would be positively assessed during the in-depth review which the EU will undertake later this year with regard to developments in Belarus and allow the EU to step up its relationship with Belarus including through the instruments in the framework of the Eastern Partnership, of which human rights issues form an integral part. In this context we look forward to the EU Ministerial Troika Meeting with Belarus scheduled for 28 July.

In this context the EU calls on the Belarusian authorities to submit as soon as possible their drafting proposals regarding changes in the electoral legislation and electoral practice to the ODIHR.

The EU welcomes the holding in June 2009 of its first human rights dialogue with Belarus. At the same time we note with concern recent developments in Belarus.

On 7 July youth activist Artsyom Dubski, who was declared prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International earlier this year, received an un-proportionally harsh sentence of one year in prison for avoiding to serve a restricted freedom sentence to which he was convicted over his participation in a demonstration on 10 January 2008. The EU reiterates the need for Belarus to respect the fundamental freedoms, such as the freedom of assembly and association. The Belarusian criminal code should be reviewed in order to better reflect these freedoms and to meet European standards.

The EU also remains worried about the health situation of the arrested entrepreneur Mikalai Autukhovich who has reportedly been on hunger strike since 16 April 2009. In this context the EU appreciates that Ambassador Schmidt was granted a visit to Mr. Autukhovich in the pre-trial detention facility on 29 May. At the same time, we urge the Belarusian authorities not to restrict the meetings of the detainee with his family members. The EU asks the Belarusian authorities to consider humanitarian aspects of the case and is looking forward to its early resolution.

The death sentence pronounced on 29 June by a regional court in Belarus on Vasili Jazepchuk gives also rise to our concern. We urge Belarus to abolish the death penalty and, as a first step, to introduce

a moratorium.

The EU has received mixed signals with regard to registration of political parties and NGOs in Belarus in recent months. While we welcome the registration of the movement “For Freedom” we deplore registration denials for the Belarusian Christian Democratic Party, the human rights organization “Nasha Viasna”, the Belarusian Liberal Party of Freedom and Progress and, most recently, for the Belarusian Assembly of Pro-Democratic Non-governmental organizations.

The EU expects Belarus to honour its commitment to a pluralistic development of the media, including by granting independent newspapers access to the state-owned distribution system and by accrediting foreign media outlets in the country. In this context the EU calls on Belarus to continue its co-operation with the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and to make full use of his recommendations.

The EU remains convinced that the OSCE Office in Minsk can contribute substantially to progress towards democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Belarus and therefore encourages the Office to continue working in this direction.

Finally, the EU would like to thank Ambassador Schmidt and his team for their dedicated work and wish them success in their future endeavours.

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

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