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Political Affairs Committee

Sub-Committee on Belarus

CONFERENCE ON BELARUS

JOINTLY ORGANISED BY THE PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

AND THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC

22 AND 23 FEBRUARY 2006
MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
Czernin Palace, Loretanske namesti 5,
PRAGUE

SUMMARY PROCEEDINGS

SUMMARY

1. At the initiative of the President of the Parliamentary Assembly, Mr René van den Linden, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Mr Cyril Svoboda, a Conference on the situation in Belarus was organised in Prague on 22-24 February 2006.
2. It was designed as a regional event involving ministries of foreign affairs of Central and Eastern Europe and members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (an Ad Hoc Committee of the Bureau was established to this effect). The invitation was also addressed to Mr Vladimir Konoplev, Chairman of the Chamber of Representatives of Belarus, and to representatives of the Belarusian united opposition.
3. The objective of the Conference was to take stock of the political situation in Belarus on the eve of the presidential elections scheduled on 19 March 2006, and to discuss possible measures aimed at supporting the democratic process in the country.
4. The level of participation at the Conference was satisfactory. The ministers of the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania (the latter representing also the chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe) and deputy ministers of Hungary, Latvia and Lithuania represented the governments of the region. Regrettably, the Russian authorities were not represented at a ministerial level.
5. Eleven parliamentarians including the President of the Parliamentary Assembly, the Chairman of the Political Affairs Committee and the Chairman of the Sub-Committee on Belarus represented the Parliamentary Assembly.
6. There was no official Belarusian delegation. However, the *chargé d'affaires* of the Belarusian Embassy in Prague participated in the Conference, although he did not take the floor. The opposition was well represented by members of the leadership of four parties united in the United Democratic Forces.
7. The Conference was divided into three parts devoted to the assessment of the present political situation in Belarus, place of Belarus in democratic Europe and a post-election strategy. The key-note speeches, attached to the present document, were followed by a discussion chaired by President Van den Linden and Minister Svoboda.
8. Speakers agreed that the situation in Belarus was deteriorating. The rule of law was not fully respected. Democratic institutions were not functioning properly. It was stressed that the separation of powers is not ensured as the legislative and the judiciary are subject to the presidential power, to a great extent. Serious restrictions exist on freedom of association and expression. Free media was persecuted, and the population was misinformed by the overwhelming official propaganda. Democratic opposition forces were intimidated and persecuted.
9. It was recalled that the Parliamentary Assembly has recently discussed the situation in Belarus on the eve of the presidential election (Doc. 10814). In this text, it expressed growing concern, in particular as regards the regime's lack of respect for the core values promoted by the Council of Europe.
10. Many participants pointed out that the forthcoming presidential election represented an important moment for future democratic developments in Belarus. However, there were serious grounds to fear that they would not be free and fair. Similarly, the electoral campaign so far has fallen short of basic democratic standards.
11. In this context it seemed important – and representatives of the opposition were in agreement on this point – that the presence of international independent monitors during the electoral process be assured. Furthermore, the presence of international observers might prevent possible violence against the opposition during the peaceful gathering called for on 19 March 2006 in the evening in the main square of Minsk.
12. The President of the Assembly clarified that the Parliamentary Assembly did not support any specific candidate for the presidency. The Assembly supported the democratic process and wanted the same clear and fair rules to be applied to all candidates.
13. Many speakers observed that the elections represented a good opportunity to open a critical reflection over the strategies pursued so far by the international community for promoting democratisation in Belarus.

14. All agreed that the support for the democratic forces, civil society and independent press should be continued. In this context, the question of the establishment of a Council of Europe Information Office in Belarus was raised.

15. The countries from the region, and in particular the Russian Federation, constitute a key element to encourage democratic developments in Belarus. The forthcoming presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe will provide a good opportunity to pursue this course of action. All representatives of the opposition present at the Conference stressed that their parties were willing to maintain good relations with the Russian Federation.

16. The issue of what strategy to adopt towards the Belarusian authorities raised some controversy. Some participants observed that the present policy of isolation had so far not brought about any positive results. They mentioned that maintaining a dialogue would entail better prospects of exerting pressure or at least persuasion.

17. A strongly dissenting opinion was expressed by Mr Kolesnikov (Russian Federation, EDG), who said that there were no legitimate grounds to interfere with the internal affairs of a sovereign state. Democracy cannot be forced on a people. In any case, President Lukashenko was adopting a firm policy, but it was within the rule of law. The situation in Belarus was not as negative as it was described by some propaganda: the economy was in good shape, unemployment was low and there were independent publications. The Russian Federation had developed an alliance with Belarus involving a high level of co-operation. There was a united migration and economic policy and citizens of the two countries enjoyed equal rights in both the Russian Federation and Belarus.

18. Opponents of this approach pointed out that the reason for the suspension of Special Guest Status for Belarus in the Parliamentary Assembly was the lack of any positive results from dialogue. They were very sceptical about the real impact of such a dialogue in the future. Moreover they stressed that it would be misused by the official propaganda.

19. The President of the Assembly inquired about the usefulness of his possible official visit to Belarus. The members of the opposition agreed that it could take place under certain strict conditions.

20. At the end of the Conference, both co-chairs, Mr Van den Linden, President of the Assembly, and Mr Svoboda, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, issued a joint statement.

**Key-Note Address by Mr Cyril Svoboda,
Minister of the Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic
(Co-Chair of the Conference)**

Dear President of the Parliamentary Assembly, dear Ministers, dear Deputy Secretary General, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to welcome you all in our country and in particular in this historical building of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I am happy that you all gathered here to discuss the current situation in Belarus and what we can and should do about it.

For us in this country it is not just another conference that deals with another political problem. The topic of your deliberations today draws strongly on our own experience and appeals to our sense of solidarity. We cannot but feel it as an obligation to try and do something for the people in Belarus. Indeed, we can even consider it as a kind of repayment.

Not so long ago we lived under regime similar to the one that Mr Lukashenko would like to install in his country today and we still bear in our memory, how unpleasant and dehumanizing that was. We can still feel in our bones how grateful we were for any interest and support from outside – from the free world. Now we are, so to say, over the hill, in the safe haven of democratic Europe. That, however, does not mean that we have any right to give up the fight, to leave alone other European nations that have not been so lucky yet.

There has been recently a lot of discussion going on about how clever and morally just it is to export our kind of democracy across the globe. Yet in case of Belarusians there is nothing to discuss. They are historical part of our European cultural circle and only due to sad coincidence of events they did not manage to regain their freedom.

Not only that, we cannot overlook the practical aspect of the whole matter – that is the fact that Byelorussia shares border with European Union. Any unstable totalitarian system so close to us is always a potential source of further problems in future years. Probably not all the countries around share this view and some may even think that Mr. Lukashenko can be a useful ally. I do not want to go into any lengthy and detailed argument here, allow me just say that history lesson teaches us that regimes, which at war with their own people never make a reliable ally.

Let me also add that there is a tangible proof that we must be doing something right vis-à-vis Belarus. I mean the nervous and upset, sometimes even hysterical reaction that comes from official places in Minsk. From our own past we learned that similar regimes become aggressive and behave just like that mostly when they feel endangered.

As you probably all know Czech diplomats in Belarus get regularly harassed and at times become even target of well prepared and orchestrated campaign of slander – not only on political and diplomatic level but also from the state-controlled media. There is quite an extensive list of our political and NGO representatives that would not get visa to be able to visit the country. Despite all that we cannot let up and ease the pressure against the system, which tries to keep alive what quite rightfully belongs to the dustbin of European history.

We consider it very important that the meeting is being organized just now at this very time. It may sound like a slogan but it is a reality when we say that Belarus is fast approaching another major milestone of its modern history: The regime moved the presidential elections to the middle of next month and the incumbent president and would-be dictator Lukashenko faces the representative of united opposition Mr. Milinkievich.

One of the big problems the opposition faced in previous years was not only the regime itself but also the fact that they could not find common language and common representation. This time they did find it and that gives them much better chance than ever. At the same time, however, they face much stronger president who had all those years to build his rule and weaken the democratic structures as much as possible. We know that the year that ended not so long ago was particularly bad in this direction.

Obviously there is not much time left till the elections and it is therefore necessary to find all available and legitimate ways in which we can help those in the country who want to move it closer to democratic Europe rather than away from it. One of our main priorities is the launching of independent radio broadcast for Belarus. There is an excellent project called European Radio for Belarus arisen from a cooperation among Czechs, Poles, Lithuanians, Belarusians, thanks to the support of the United States as well as the European Commission. We do believe that this radio will become a demonstration of fruitful, efficient and systematic assistance of democratic world to Belarus. We must also prepare for the elections as good observer mission as the situation will allow us, since we know from previous experience that the regime does not shy away from any possibility to influence the elections to its advantage.

We must be aware of the fact that Mr. Lukashenko may in one way or other win the elections. It would be unpleasant but it surely would not be the end of the fight. We should let the people of Belarus know that we are not giving up on them and that we will support them further on their way to freedom. We will also keep on pushing within the European Union common foreign policy towards that end.

Still, for the time being let us hope for the best and let us put all our resolve and strength to it. Your deliberations here today are part of that effort and I wish you lot of success in it.

**Key-Note Address by Mr René van der Linden,
President of the Parliamentary Assembly
(Co-Chair of the Conference)**

Dear Ministers, parliamentarians and distinguished guests,

It is a pleasure for me to join my friend, Minister Cyril Svoboda, in thanking you for accepting our invitation to participate in this conference.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is a pan-European assembly: we count 46 parliamentary delegations representing eight hundred million Europeans.

This is a great achievement but it is not complete yet. One country is missing: Belarus. And with it, ten million Belarusians, ten million Europeans.

Our aspiration is to open the doors of our common European home to these ten million Europeans. We are the European home of democracy and we want to see all Europeans living under the same roof sharing the same values.

We want to see democratically elected representatives of the Belarusian people sitting in the Assembly in Strasbourg, next to their European colleagues. The Assembly is a school of democracy; we need them to attend this school.

However, we cannot do it at the moment.

Our Assembly has recently discussed the situation in Belarus on the eve of the presidential elections. It has expressed growing concern, in particular as regards the core values promoted by the Council of Europe.

- separation of powers is not ensured, because legislation and judiciary are subject, to a great extent, to the presidential power;
- restrictions exist on freedom of association and expression;
- the rule of law is not fully ensured and the judiciary can be manipulated to suffocate voices of dissent.

Furthermore, people in Belarus are kept misinformed on the way in which other Europeans live, through the use of propaganda instruments and through limitations to academic freedom and travelling abroad.

The March presidential election represents an important moment for future democratic developments in Belarus.

I wish that this election would be free and fair. Unfortunately, I fear that existing conditions will not allow for this.

However, I want to be clear. As in any election, our Assembly does not support this or that candidate: we want the same clear and fair rules to apply to every candidate, and we think that people should be free to decide.

The approach of this presidential election represents an important opportunity for the Council of Europe, other international organisations and countries from the region to take stock of their current policies and look forward, beyond the March vote.

This is the moment to open a critical reflection over the strategies that we have pursued so far for promoting democratic developments in Belarus as regards, on the one hand, relations with the Belarusian authorities and, on the other, support to civil society and democratic forces.

This is the moment to think how to improve international coordination in our policies towards Belarus.

For me, this gathering is an important step in this direction and I am glad to see that most of the invited countries are represented at political level.

The countries from the region are a key element to encourage democratic development in Belarus. All of them have constant contacts with Belarusian society, including Belarusian authorities, opposition forces, civil society and Belarusians at large, thanks to the geographical proximity and sometimes language and cultural affinity.

Among these countries, of course, the Russian Federation is of particular importance given its special institutional relationship with Belarus. I count on Russia, as a full-fledged member of the Council of Europe, to join the international efforts aimed at promoting democracy in Belarus. The forthcoming Russian presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe will provide a great opportunity to lead such action.

We are all aware of the difficulty of finding effective ways to persuade the Belarusian authorities to bring Belarus closer to the European standards.

Our Assembly has followed events in Belarus since 1992, when it granted Special Guest Status to the Belarusian Parliament, in connection with Belarus' application for membership to the Council of Europe.

Since the constitutional changes of 1996, year after year, we have observed a deterioration of the situation in the country and we have responded by adapting our strategy:

We suspended Special Guest Status in 1997.

Then we tried to continue a dialogue with the authorities while being critical about the situation in Belarus.

This dialogue was not unfortunately bringing enough results and now our contacts with the Belarusian authorities are now very limited.

During the same period, we may not have done enough to give concrete support to the grass-root democratic processes, in particular the civil society.

And during that time, the Belarusian people have been even further isolated from the rest of Europe.

We have to be very cautious, and avoid contributing to keeping this wall up.

Our role in this process is breaking the isolation of Belarusian people.

That's why we need to strengthen direct contacts and continue exchanges of experience with Belarusian democratic forces and civil society;

But we also need to maintain a dialogue with the Belarusian authorities. We should not refrain from official contacts for fear that our message will be manipulated, provided that we say things clearly.

We absolutely need to reinforce our presence in Belarus. Our Assembly has suggested establishing an Information Centre of the Council of Europe in Belarus.

I think that this initiative is of fundamental importance to enable us reach the people in Belarus and I ask you, as government representatives, to give it your political support.

I will make a specific proposal to the Russian authorities, as I believe that the support of the Russian chairmanship of the Council of Europe should be decisive in putting this recommendation into practice.

I will also ask that such a Centre is co-financed by the European Union.

Dear Ministers, parliamentarians and distinguished guests,

Our Assembly has the aspiration to see the whole of Europe as a peaceful continent, where democracy, the rule of law and human rights are universally accepted.

However, we must not forget that democracy, human rights and the rule of law are not an aim in itself. Respect of these principles creates the framework for sustainable economic growth and development, ensuring the final objective: the well-being of our citizens.

I look forward to the day when ten million more Europeans will share with us this well-being.

We have to work together to ensure that Belarusians achieve long-lasting democracy, prosperity and stability for their own country in a peaceful Europe.

Let us start working hard on this objective today.

Key-Note Address by Mr Eduard Kukan, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Slovakia

I want to express my most sincere gratitude to René van der Linden, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and to my colleague and friend Cyril Svoboda, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic. I am pleased to see a strong delegation from Belarus sitting here in the first row, at such a crucial moment for developments in Belarus.

Today we meet in an historical hall where the dissolution of the Warsaw treaty was concluded. I hope that this will inspire another dissolution, that of the authoritarian regime in Belarus.

By accepting the invitation to this conference I wanted to confirm the importance that Slovakia gives to the Republic of Belarus and to the development of a democratic process in Belarus. I hope that this conference will bring new ideas and help to create momentum towards the goal of democratisation.

The timing of the Conference is appropriate: there is less than one month before the presidential election in Belarus. The results of this election will be decisive for determining the future political process in the country and its orientation in foreign relations. By confirming its adherence to international electoral standards, by ensuring equal opportunities for all candidates and the smooth conduct of the election and by eliminating shortcomings in the situation of civil society, Belarus could – and I stress could – launch a meaningful dialogue with the European Union and its member states. The Belarusian political leadership now has a unique chance for resuming a partnership for cooperation. I know it can sound optimistic, but we should leave them a chance to seize this opportunity.

The existing social and political environment in Belarus cannot be called free and democratic. Perhaps this sounds like an understatement but I want to be diplomatic. Unfortunately, this is not a new observation. We regret the lack of any improvement for a long period of time. This is clearly illustrated by the development of relations between Belarus and one of the organisers of this event, the Council of Europe. As the PACE President said, Belarus is not yet a member of the Council of Europe despite applying in 1993. Moreover, it is the only European country which did not obtain the member status. The reasons are well known: shortcomings in the building of civil society and the application of democratic standards endorsed by the Council of Europe. These shortcomings have been repeatedly signalled to the Belarusian authorities not only from the Council of Europe but also the OSCE and other international organisations. The situation in Belarus has remained unchanged; it keeps getting worse.

In the run-up to the presidential election the Lukashenko regime is stepping up pressure. Restrictions on freedom of expression, on the activities of independent media and non-governmental organisations, the suppression of the activities of opposition parties and the imprisonment of political rivals are some of the main manifestations of the oppressive actions by the regime against its opponents. The aim is to create a society without any real political opposition and ensure the re-election of Alexander Lukashenko as President of Belarus.

Unfortunately, the actions of the authorities in the preparation for the election indicates that the regime did not hesitate in breaching electoral standards enforced by the OSCE. It was a positive step from the Belarusian authorities to invite independent observers but on the other hand, the composition of the electoral commissions where there are no members from the opposition can be considered as an obstructive practice. The opportunities for presidential candidates to present their programmes on the media were very limited.

The Belarusian leadership must realise that if it continues on this path, the European Union could find itself in the situation that it won't be possible to declare the election fair and free. The opportunity of resuming a dialogue between the European Union and Belarus would then be wasted. Yet the Belarusian people are considered to be part of the wide family of European nations and Belarus is an integral part of Europe and European history. I want to believe that Belarus will accept the reached out hand of the European Union and accept democratic principles, to stop its self-imposed isolation from the European Union, from Europe and from the North Atlantic Alliance. If so, Belarus will stand a real chance to be included in the New European Neighbourhood Policy programme, where it has a rightful place by being an immediate neighbour of the European Union.

On the other hand, the Belarusian leadership must realise that if the repeated calls by the European Union for an improvement in the political situation in Belarus and for compliance with electoral standards are not

met, harsher measures will have to be taken, as well as further restrictions against the representatives of the Belarusian leadership. In no case, however, should this be to the detriment of the citizens of Belarus, which are in no way responsible for the current state of the situation in Belarus; just the opposite: they are the victims of the policies of their leaders.

This is why the European Union must improve communication with Belarusian citizens including granting some advantages such as easier travelling, study periods, etc. It is the Belarusian citizens that should contribute to changing the situation in the country by opening communication with the world. Slovakia is in favour of an increased engagement of the European Union with a view to overcoming the tendency to isolation of the country and to ensure the dissemination of information on shared values of the democratic world. In this connection, we believe it necessary to set up a representation of the European Commission in Minsk. Its task should include the mitigation of the consequences of the misinformation campaign against the European Union and its member states conducted by the Belarusian authorities.

In our view, the dominant position of state-controlled media is one of the key problems in Belarus. We therefore support initiatives and projects leading to the creation of an alternative media environment which would enable the provision of independent objective information. Without such an environment it is hardly possible to expect positive changes in Belarus, an improvement of the situation and an enhancement of the influence of Belarusian democratic forces.

Considering the internal political situation and the self-imposed isolation of the Belarusian leadership, Slovakia and the European Union encourage open cooperation with all democratic, pro-reform and pro-European forces in Belarus. In this spirit we consider the effort to put Alexander Milinkevich forward as the single candidate of the united opposition forces to be a step in the right direction. Creating a political counterweight to the current leadership which disregards democratic principles should be a permanent challenge for the Belarusian opposition, even after the presidential election. The international community is ready to continue cooperating with Belarusian democratic forces in the future and to help involve the country in the partnership of international cooperation. The same goes for building civil society.

The obvious violation of human rights of the citizens of Belarus and of the commitments in the field of democracy that the country entered into upon becoming a OSCE member are the reasons for the active engagement of the international community and to exert pressure on Belarus to make it adhere to democratic principles. We consider it necessary to maintain close cooperation in the international community, especially at the level of the European Union and the United States. Indeed, it is our belief that it is precisely by working together in favour democratisation in countries like Belarus that the transatlantic relationship can grow and strengthen. Together, the United States and Europe have been a force for good in the past. Belarus gives us an opportunity to show that we are still a force for good and we can continue to be so in the future. Only this effort of cooperation and coordination will prevent Belarusian representatives from manoeuvring against the interests of individual countries, weakening the thrust of demands for democratisation of the country.

Slovakia, in line with its foreign policy priority to promote democratic values and respect for human rights, takes an active interest in developments in Belarus and joins international endeavours concerning the country. We are committed to developing and fostering new relationships with our eastern European neighbours of the enlarged European Union. We intend to ensure that Belarus, being a European country, develops partnership relationships with Slovakia and with other European countries on the basis of shared democratic values. We consider supporting democratisation in Belarus not only as a political priority but as a moral obligation towards the citizens of that country, which is the last one in Europe to be confronted with the policy of an authoritarian regime and the only one to be isolated despite its European history and culture.

As a country which has its own experience in fighting an authoritarian regime, the Slovak Republic is ready to share the experience it acquired in building democratic institutions, civil society and market economy with partners in Belarus. We are interested in developing bilateral relations. We pursue the objective of building good and friendly relations based on the principles of equality, transparency and mutual benefit. However, because of the political situation in Belarus and the policy of President Lukashenko we consider our current relations with that country as falling short of their potential.

Slovakia's policy towards Belarus is based on two pillars: on the one hand, in line with the policy of the European Union, we take a guarded attitude towards its top representatives; on the other hand, we fully support the development of proactive contacts with NGOs, local authorities, business entities, which represent an opportunity to overcome the tendency of isolation of the Belarusian leadership. One example of this has been the presentation in Minsk of an exhibition on Slovak art and culture, which was an opportunity for the Belarusian public at large to become acquainted with the culture of a new European Union member

state and offered the opportunity of establishing contacts between people, artists and members of civil society of the two countries. This event was organised by an NGO which has the support of the government of Slovakia. Indeed, we think that the close cooperation with the NGO sector is an important element of our policy towards Belarus, and we always try to involve NGOs in the framework of development assistance.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

In concluding I would like to state that the Slovak Republic will continue its pro-active approach in bilateral relations and the multilateral approach, mainly within the European Union. In this context the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Slovakia, in cooperation with the Slovak Policy Association, will organise a conference on Belarus on 25 and 26 April. This will be an opportunity to evaluate the results of the election.

**Key-Note Address by Mr Teodor Baconschi,
State Secretary for Global Affairs of Romania,
on behalf of the Chairman-in-Office of the Committee of Ministers of the
Council of Europe**

Your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

I have a special sentiment in meeting you here in Prague today. It's always a pleasure to meet people who, in their countries, are confronted with the same challenges as us. On the one hand, an event like this one reminds us that there are still places in Europe where people are confronted on a daily basis with other kind of problems, which we in Eastern Europe remember from our past experience. We know exactly what it is like when publications are closed down or are pushed out of business by the authorities. We know what lack of freedom of speech is. We also know that people cannot express their views because of the risk of being arrested. We know what it is like when the leadership of a country changes the legislation to allow its own re-election now and again. It is all familiar to us because of our past of communist regime. In the '80s we were severely limited in expressing ourselves at home; we received scarcely any information from the outside world, yet we were hoping that democratic countries would act against dictators. We considered that it was a duty of theirs. If it was so then, we should not stay and watch a regime which does not abide by the commitments it has taken in international fora.

Against this background, the presidential election is a window of opportunity for Belarus and its current leadership. Our perspective is that we are not against a specific candidate, we are not in favour of another candidate, but we are in support of the principles of free and fair elections and the respect of fundamental freedoms.

As Chairman-in-office of the Committee of Ministers, Romania has expressed its position on the present regime in Belarus and has asked the authorities to reverse the deteriorating trend in respect of democracy, rule of law and human rights. Romania has taken public position against the legislation enacted in December, which severely curtailed freedom of expression and association in Belarus. Along with other European Union member states we express our disappointment at the measures against NGOs, such as the Belarus Helsinki Committee.

The long-term effects are detrimental, first of all for the legitimacy of the current political leadership. Belarus' government continues with the arrest of demonstrators in Minsk. It is our duty to call on the authorities to discontinue this practice and leave people free to express their ideas. Moreover, independent media is instrumental to good governance: the government in Belarus should know that harassing independent media is just the opposite of what it should do to increase its authority. Recent steps against independent journals are an additional matter of concern in view of the electoral campaign. We support the initiative of the European Union and its member states aimed at opening alternative channels of information for the people of Belarus, try to break the regime's monopoly on the media. Information pluralism and civil society directly is linked to political life. Political pluralism is a pre-requisite for the unfolding of free and fair elections in compliance with OSCE and United Nations standards.

I also take this opportunity to address the issue of the debate on Belarus: some people say that what happens in Belarus is a shame as it takes place in the backyard of the European Union; others point to the special relationship that Belarus holds with the Russian Federation. I think that what happens in our neighbourhood is a concern for both the European Union and Russia. None of us can afford seeing the development of events that could create more serious problems in the future. I count on our Russian colleagues, in their capacity as Council of Europe members and also incoming chair of the Committee of Ministers devoted to the principles of our Organisation. They understand better than others the situation in Belarus, given the relations between the two countries, especially at people-to-people level.

Romania will participate with observers in the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission in Belarus. This is of crucial importance for assessing the post-election situation and deciding the strategy of the Council of Europe towards the regime and the civil society. The promotion and defence of democracy and human rights in Belarus will not only fall under the responsibility of the Romanian chairmanship but of the entire Organisation, including its Parliamentary Assembly.

The young people of Belarus, members of civil society, engineers, lawyers and people at large should realise that Europe pursues the vision of being a continent without dividing lines. I hope that this conference will have a follow up, for the benefit of the people of Belarus. I look forward to meeting you again in the close future.

Thank you very much for your attention.

PART I - Situation in Belarus on the eve of the 2006 presidential election

Introduction: Situation in Belarus on the eve of the 2006 presidential election by Mr Andres Herkel, Chair of the Sub-Committee on Belarus

Dear President of the Assembly, Ministers, distinguished guests,

Many of us expected the presidential election in Belarus to be held this summer, or this autumn. Instead they will be next month, four months ahead of the end of the current term-of-office.

During its last session our Assembly decided that the situation in Belarus on the eve of this early presidential election was so serious as to deserve an urgent debate. We felt that it was important to state our views before the elections, to explain our concerns, support positive developments and reaffirm our position.

PACE has followed developments in Belarus since 1992, in connection with Belarus' application for membership to the Council of Europe. We regret that Belarus does not meet the conditions to be a member of the Council of Europe in terms of pluralist democracy, compliance with the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. But even more, we regret that the current regime gives no signs of wanting to bring Belarus closer to these standards.

In fact, it is clear to us that in the run-up to the elections, the Lukashenko regime has undertaken a series of measures placing additional obstacles to the expression of political pluralism.

There are several matters that we consider particularly disturbing:

- The so-called 'anti-revolution law', which – in my opinion – should be called 'anti-democratic law': this law is against Belarusian society as a whole. People can be sentenced for participating in a street protest or for preparing somebody on how to behave in a street protest. People can be punished for 'misrepresenting' the situation in Belarus with foreign countries and international organisations. This law is like the sword of Damocles over the heads of all those who want to exercise their right of free speech, a right which is the foundation of democracy, and which is enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, of which Belarus is a State party.

The anti-revolution law joins a number of other pieces of legislation which impose all sorts of limitations on the activities of political parties and non-governmental organisations.

- Another obvious matter of concern is the lack of independence of the judiciary and the fact that a number of political figures pay with prison sentences for their courage in opposing the regime. The case of Mikhail Marinich, a former ambassador and presidential candidate in the last presidential election in Belarus, is a typical example: in December 2004, after being held for over 7 months on unclear grounds, Marinich was sentenced to 5 years of imprisonment for stealing a computer which had been made available to his non-governmental organisation from the United States. The US Government clarified that it had no claims against Marinich but this did not count for the court. As if this was not enough, while in detention, he was refused the medical treatment he needed against diabetes. He then suffered a stroke, for which he was not promptly treated.

Unfortunately, Marinich's case is not unique. There are a number of opposition figures currently in prison, who have been sentenced for political reasons, on spurious or fabricated grounds.

- Also the total control of state media by the regime and then increasing obstructions to the activities of the few existing independent media continue to preoccupy our Assembly. Some years ago, there were about 60 independent media outlets. Now, just on the eve of the elections, the number is very small.

In my view, freedom of the media is a basic precondition for democracy, in any country and at any time. But it becomes pivotal in times of elections. How is it possible for Belarusian citizens to make a free choice in the elections if the information they receive is distorted, biased or incomplete? How is it possible to talk about equal access to public media for all the presidential contenders when one of them has total control on the state television and uses it as an instrument of propaganda?

We should not forget that the very participation of President Lukashenko in the forthcoming election raises an issue of compliance with the rule of law: in its Opinion on the referendum of 17 October 2004 in Belarus, the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) argued that the referendum which removed the limitation of two terms in office was contrary to the Belarusian electoral law as well as Council of Europe standards.

From the opposition side, instead, the novelty of these elections is that for the first time democratic political forces of Belarus have agreed on a single candidate to challenge the incumbent President, well in advance of the foreseen date of the elections. In addition, a number of political figures have respected the commitment not to present their candidature once a single contender had been elected. Alexander Milinkevich, the Single Candidate of the Unified Democratic Forces, relies therefore on a cross-party private office, nomination group and electoral basis.

I have started my presentation by recalling that the presidential vote will be held four months before the end of the current term-of-office. Why are these elections so early? Much speculation can be made about the reasons. I think that one of the possible answers is that democratic forces have started to be considered as a serious threat by the regime.

Of course the most apparent sign of an increased maturity of the opposition is the election of the single candidate through a democratic vote. But there are also other positive signs, of which I hope our guests will better inform us during this conference:

- Firstly, democratic forces have understood that they have to gain the favour of the Belarusian people.

In a country where access to the media is beyond their reach, they have decided to organise themselves and campaign door-to-door. This tactic is of great significance for their visibility. In fact, the importance of this electoral campaign, in my opinion, goes well beyond the presidential vote of 19 March, whatever its result might be: this electoral campaign is an opportunity to advance the visibility of a democratic alternative to the current regime among the population at large, with a view to gaining the broad support which democratic forces have so far lacked.

Democracy cannot be achieved without popular support, nor can it be maintained unless its values are rooted in the society. This awareness is an important achievement for Belarusian democratic forces.

- Secondly, the unity of a number of pro-democratic parties and forces under the Coalition supporting Milinkevich has proved to be possible, despite ideological differences.

This Coalition unites parties and forces as diverse as the Belarusian Popular Front, the Communist Party, the United Civil Party of Belarus, and many others. These different factions and groups all work in the same team to gain the widest support for Alexander Milinkevich.

It would be a mistake, however, to take this unity for granted or to consider it only as an instrumental pre-electoral strategy: democratic forces should also work to preserve their unity after the presidential election, and once again, irrespective of its results.

In conclusion, I would like to mention that our Assembly attaches the greatest importance to the forthcoming election: not only as a means to improve the visibility of democratic forces among the electorate but also as an opportunity for the current regime to comply with European and international standards.

The existing conditions in terms of freedom of expression and freedom of the media make the holding of a free and fair election in Belarus unlikely. On the other hand, the invitation by the Belarusian authorities to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to observe the presidential election cannot but be welcomed: independent monitoring is even more important in light of the fact that there is a candidate who represents the democratic forces of the country.

Finally, this election has catalysed the attention of a number of international actors and donors who have a genuine interest in seeing Belarus join the family of European democracies. I hope that this can create sufficient momentum for the elaboration and implementation of a common strategy towards Belarus. I hope that today's gathering is the first step in this direction.

The situation of democratic forces by Mr Stanislav Sushkevich, Chairman of the Belarusian Social-Democratic Party*

Ladies and gentlemen, despite an agreement having been signed ending the existence of the USSR on 8 December 1991, I have come here today from the former Soviet Union.

In Belarus, the old order of the former Soviet Union is firmly in place, barely changed to the present day. After the Istanbul summit in 1999 and the presidential elections in 2001 in Belarus, the democratic parties and movements realised that if they did not take a united stand against what was happening in Belarus, resisting a dictatorship would be impossible. And on 19 January 2004, after a year of joint work, we signed an agreement uniting the efforts of 11 political parties and over 200 non-governmental organisations. We have been working together ever since. We present ourselves as the United Democratic Forces of Belarus. I believe that we represent more than 92 or 93% of the democratically inclined activists in Belarus, and there is no other democratic structure in the country opposed to those currently in power.

It has quite rightly been said here that there is no opposition in Belarus as Europeans understand it. Parliament was dissolved, a new so-called parliament was appointed, and in the event we are a kind of shadow counterforce. Our platform is very simple. We want to democratise our country, we want human rights to be respected there, we want Belarus to be an independent State.

I was exceedingly pleased to hear today that Europe is guiding Russia towards cooperation with Belarus and the Belarusian authorities, and I think that it is precisely the Russian authorities which are capable of influencing the position of our own administration. Unfortunately, this is not happening for the time being.

In the Belarusian opposition, there are no forces opposing Russia, nor have there been and nor will there be. I would like to make that quite clear.

We have demonstrated enviable unity, and in a context of wildcat opposition and repression, we ran countrywide events and at a congress elected a single democratic forces candidate in the most democratic manner. And despite the authorities' claims that it would be a meeting of "thugs" numbering 100 at the most, the congress of democratic forces was attended by over 1,000 democratically chosen delegates and its level of intellect was such that some 100 PhDs and graduates represented the intellectual elite of Belarus.

We managed to raise the awareness rating for Aleksandr Milinkevich from 1.5% to 80% by the middle of January this year and the level of support for him from 1.5% to 25%. That scared the authorities, and they called early elections because we would certainly have won elections held on the due date.

But I assure you that we will win these elections too, because today the opinion polls show that the majority of citizens in Minsk are against Lukashenko. And already at this stage, at the best estimate Lukashenko will not get more than 50% of the vote.

That means that, were the elections to be honest, our victory is inevitable. We have just one difficulty, a very major one, and that is protecting the results.

As I do not have time here for a lengthy speech, I would say that we have just one request.

Before that, let me say thank you for what you do and the civilised way in which you do it.

And now our request: our one problem is that we cannot pass on our knowledge and insight to the people of Belarus, who are under an information blockade. We need assistance with just one thing, and that is informing the people of Belarus of our position. We need all the means that characterise independent media, and we hope that this will break through the blockade.

The electronic media are one hundred percent in the hands of the administration. For every copy of a so-called independent small newspaper printed today there are over 25 copies of government propaganda papers. If, in your peaceful, civilised manner, you can help us get information to the citizens of Belarus, we can break up this dictatorship and, without the need for a revolution, return Belarus to the European fold.

Thank you for listening, we are counting on you.

* Translation

PART II - Place of Belarus in Democratic Europe

Introduction: a Council of Europe perspective by Ms Maud De Boer-Buquicchio, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe

Mr President,

In exactly two weeks' and two days' time it will be thirteen years since Belarus applied for membership in the Council of Europe. At that time, we had 27 member States. Today, 46 national flags fly in front of the Palais de l'Europe in Strasbourg. The only European flag missing is that of Belarus.

Yes, we in the Council of Europe do wish Belarus to take its rightful place amongst our member States. Of course, our motivation is not to complete the rainbow of flags that adorn the Council of Europe. And, contrary to what we sometimes hear, we do not have the ambition to teach the Belarusian people how to set up their state and society. So let me briefly give you the Council of Europe view on the place of Belarus in democratic Europe.

The vision of the founding fathers of the Council of Europe was to seek closer unity between its members on the basis of the common spiritual and moral heritage of their peoples. They identified individual freedom, political liberty and the rule of law as the basis of all genuine democracy and wrote in the Statute that every member of the Council of Europe must accept the principles of the rule of law and of the enjoyment by all persons within its jurisdiction of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

After they adopted the Statute of the Council of Europe, the member States did not merely discuss in a theoretical way the meaning of the statutory values and principles. They also set about working on ways to put them into practice. They negotiated, signed and ratified the Convention for the protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and established the Strasbourg Court for Human Rights. Then they adopted the Social Charter, the Cultural Convention, the Anti-Torture Convention and so on. Today the number of Council of Europe Treaties is close to two hundred. They offer protection and practical solutions to the citizens of Europe – even if they may not be aware of this until they need it.

During the years of the Cold War, as this work was underway in the Council of Europe, in parallel, in other diplomatic fora, there were lengthy and often heated discussions on the theoretical meaning of democracy and human rights and on whose democracy was better. We all know the result.

We in the Council of Europe have no wish to enter into discussions with Minsk on whether media in Belarus are free, less free or not free at all. We do not want to argue whether elections were fair, or less than fair, or unfair. We wish that Belarus becomes a fully fledged member.

That would mean that the Belarusian Government would have accepted the Council of Europe statutory obligations. That would mean that the Belarusian Parliament would have ratified the major Council of Europe conventions. There would be no more death penalty in Belarus. The people of Belarus and all those who visit this wonderful country would enjoy the protection of the Human Rights Convention and the Strasbourg Court. The people of Belarus would have the facility of all the Council of Europe conventions for mutual assistance and co-operation in the legal field, in education, in transborder co-operation... The Belarusian authorities would have a stronger hand in fighting corruption, organised crime, human trafficking. The Belarusian Government representatives would participate fully in discussing the all-European problems and challenges with their opposite numbers from all 46 member States.

For the rest, the Belarusian people would be free to establish their system of Government in accordance with their national traditions, customs and preferences. With regard to those who accuse the Council of Europe of seeking to impose our views on how Belarus should be governed, I would invite them to look around at the extraordinary diversity of systems of Government in our member States. There are constitutional monarchies, presidential and parliamentary republics with either one- or two-chamber parliaments, unitary or federal states, not to mention the variety of regional and local arrangements and of relations between local and central authorities. The basis for unity is respect for the three Council of Europe pillars: pluralistic democracy, rule of law and human rights.

Of course, governance in Belarus would have many things in common with governance in other Council of Europe member States. Most importantly, the Belarusian people would be free to elect their Government in free and fair elections and would also be free to change their Government - through the ballot box. Once again, concerning those who accuse the Council of Europe of having political preferences with regard to Belarus, I would invite them to look around at the full palette of political forces in power in our member States – from left to centre to right - as voters have chosen them.

Amongst the international organisations, the Council of Europe is perhaps the one with the strongest links to civil society. We have institutional links with over 400 non-governmental organisations in Europe. We maintain good co-operation with the civil society of Belarus. However, the possibilities for such co-operation depend on the attitude of the authorities.

Co-operation with civil society cannot substitute for full, normal relations with the authorities of a country. Until such time as Belarus becomes a full member, the Council of Europe can maintain an open door policy, but we cannot offer full co-operation.

The Council of Europe is a legal standard-setting organisation. Legal standards are only possible if there is full and unconditional respect for the rule of law. That is why a number of conventions are the so-called closed conventions, accessible only to member States.

For example, Belarus cannot join the Council of Europe conventions on extradition or mutual assistance in criminal matters, until our member States are convinced that Belarus has firmly established all the guarantees of due process of law. Our member States will not, for example, accept a Belarusian demand for the extradition of a journalist who is accused of defamation under the present Belarusian legislation. This legislation is contrary to the European Convention on Human Rights and the Strasbourg Court case-law. In this hypothetical case, both the extradition and the conviction of a journalist would be overruled by the Strasbourg Court.

So how is Belarus to become a member of the Council of Europe and take its rightful place in democratic Europe? According to our founding fathers, who established the Council of Europe, Belarus must be “deemed to be able and willing” to fulfil the obligations and commitments of membership and be invited by the Committee of Ministers. In other words, this is a decision not by Belarus, but by the Council of Europe member States. That in turn means going through a procedure, which involves examining the compatibility of the internal legal order of Belarus with the European Convention on Human Rights and accepting the opinion of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Besides everything else, democracy is also respect for democratic procedure.

We do not expect a candidate country to be perfect from the very beginning but to undertake a firm commitment to achieve democratic standards with Council of Europe help. This is true for all member States: democracy is a process and never an *acquis*.

Meeting people, good friends from Belarus, reminds us repeatedly on the importance of independent information for the development of a democratic and economic prosperous country. Where there is an “information blockade” and information is withheld – there democracy can not exist.

Belarus is the only country in Central and Eastern Europe that has not shown serious interest in joining the process of European integration: We should of course recall that media freedom is indispensable for holding free and fair elections, all candidates having equal access to electronic media: But independent information sources also are essential that people make their informed choice about their European future.

The Belarusian society must be able to receive freely independent information to form their own opinion about the situation in their own country and the added value of being a member of the Council of Europe.

I do hope that the conditions in Belarus will change for the better as soon as possible, so that the procedure of accession can resume its course and bring Belarus into the European family of democratic nations.

Key-note speech by Mrs Barbara Tuge- Erecińskiej, Secretary of State of Foreign Affairs of Poland

I would like to thank our host, Minister Svoboda and President van der Linden, for organizing such an important conference. I see that importance in the context of the crucial period in which Belarus finds itself, as well as the launching of the debate about Belarus in both Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the European Union. I am pleased with the participation of the representatives of Belarus at today's meeting.

I call for the full respect of democratic standards during the forthcoming elections and I hope that the spirit of impartiality will prevail in Belarus electoral commissions, at central and local level. At the same time, I have to express concern also because of preventing independent candidates from free campaigning. It is very often that Byelorussian citizens are being forced to sign lists of support for the actual president's candidacy. Abuse of power is growing.

The international community which we are largely representing here is more and more inspired by developments on the Byelorussian political scene, by the courageous building up of a pluralistic democracy at the political and social level. I welcome the decision of the Congress of Democratic Forces in Belarus to present a common candidate for the presidential elections, creating a new framework for pluralistic political life in Belarus.

In order to promote this new pluralistic development in Belarus, Mr. Milinkiewicz, few weeks ago, visited Brussels and had interesting discussions with many colleagues from the Council, with President Borrel, High Representative Solana and the Commission President Barroso, commissioner Ferrero-Waldner and others. Mr. Milinkiewicz has briefed many of us on the situation in the run up to the elections and his program.

Now we have a similar opportunity to discuss the perspective for the Belarusian society at the forum of the Council of Europe.

Actually, the Council of Europe has been active since long time ago, by assisting democracy and the pluralistic civil society in Belarus. In the course of the Third Summit of the Council of Europe the heads of state and government of many European states expressed their concern at the fact that the Republic of Belarus remains the only state on the European continent that is not a member of that unique European organization, which for decades has integrated the states and peoples of Europe on the basis of the fundamental values of the European civilization, human rights, the rule of law and democracy. The Warsaw Summit clearly stated: "We look forward to the day when Belarus is ready to join the Council of Europe".

On the basis of the Warsaw Declaration, the launching meeting of the Council of Europe Forum on the Future of Democracy invited and had an intensive discussion with the representative of Byelorussian congress of Democratic Forces. The Warsaw Forum meeting inspired us to continue that experience by inviting the representatives of civil society of Belarus for many of Council of Europe events and activities.

In my understanding, the purpose of our conference in Prague is to express our solidarity with the people of Belarus in their efforts to overcome many difficulties.

The Byelorussian people have for centuries been an important part of the European civilization, significantly participating in the dialog between the East and West of Europe and making notable cultural contributions.

We feel that European integration based on our common heritage and values is the destiny of Belarus. We strongly believe the Belarusian people share this conviction. For this reason we hope that the message from our conference reaches the Byelorussian society and is received in good faith.

It is very important that the European organisations - the Council of Europe, European Union and the OSCE - express their readiness to continue cooperation and aid programs addressed to Byelorussians in such areas as education and culture, nurturing of the civil society, development of self-government, sustainable development and good governance, for the benefit of Belarus and all Europe.

In that context, if the upcoming elections will strengthen the democratic process in Belarus, it will be a turning point for the country in its relations with the whole Europe and the democratic world. We believe that Belarus will soon meet the basic standards which embody the essence of the European civilisation, and will join our community, if such is the will of the Byelorussian people.

In order to promote that perspective, referring to the Warsaw Declaration, Poland proposed launching a special program on the Byelorussian question by the Council of Europe. The details of this program are now discussed by the Committee of Ministers and it already enjoys a broad support by many member states.

Let me now draw your attention on some substantial elements of it:

- Periodic inclusion into the agenda of the Council of Europe bodies items concerning Belarus. The same concerns the *quadripartite* meetings with European Union and 2+2/3+3 format meetings with OSCE.
- Inviting independent eminent persons of political life in Belarus including representatives of the opposition, local government, parliament, NGO community, personalities of culture and science to the meetings and to various activities of the Council of Europe, in particular to the Democracy. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities could invite selected representatives of local governments in Belarus as observers.
- Encouraging the Venice Commission to increase attention to and to enhance co-operation with Belarus, as a Commission's associate member.
- Supporting trans-frontier co-operation with Belarus, i.a. within existing euro-regions ("Bug", "Niemen") would be the useful factor of bringing the Belarusian civil society closer to the European standards. The appropriate financial resources for this purpose could be guaranteed in the Council of Europe budget in co-operation with European Union.
- Making use of the instruments provided by the European Cultural Convention for promoting the study by Byelorussians of the languages, history and civilization of the other European countries (article 2a of the Convention). Fulfilling by the government in Minsk the art. 2 of the Convention may result in removing the information barrier existing in Belarus. Article 4 of the ECC may also constitute an important factor acquainting Belarus with European standards. Special attention should be paid by the Council of Europe also to increase Member States' interest about Belarus, by promoting studies of Byelorussian language, history and culture, as part of European civilization.

As you see, the aim of that program is to increase the knowledge about Europe in Belarus and about Belarus among Europeans, as well as foster democratic transformation of Belarus.

To conclude, I would like to stress the following:

The issue of Byelorussian democracy has become a fundamental challenge of our European community. We need to create an informal "group of friends of Belarus" to assist in enhancing Byelorussian democratic movement.

Special emphasis should be made in the joint Council of Europe, European Union and other organisations' activities for Byelorussian citizens' access to free information and access to the media by the political actors at all levels in Belarus.

The most pressing challenge is the observance of basic democratic rules during the coming Byelorussian presidential elections. The attendance of international observers should give the people in the country the feeling of not being alone.

We propose organising on the 12 March (the anniversary of submission in 1993 by Belarus of the request to adhere to the Council of Europe) the day of Belarus in the Council of Europe. This day should remind us of the Byelorussian issue and give the opportunity to get acquainted with the Byelorussian culture and traditions. In anticipation of such an event Poland would like to present an exhibition "Civic Belarus" in the Council of Europe building on Strasbourg.

Thank you for your attention

Key-note speech by Ms Vaira Paegle, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia

Distinguished colleagues,

A week doesn't go by when there isn't a high level discussion about Belarus. The diagnosis is clear, the treatment ineffective and the prognosis poor. What we are lacking are new, unexpected and creative ideas for enforcing Council of Europe standards of a pluralist democracy on a repressive dictatorship. At the same time, as a colleague once said in Washington – Belarus has no territorial claims, doesn't export terrorism, nor support a policy of ethnic cleansing. So, the first fundamental question is – in the overall scheme of things – how important really is the democratisation of Belarus to its neighbours, the European Union, PACE, OSCE, USA before, during and after the March 19 elections?

Another important question – is Russia part of the problem or the solution to the situation in Belarus?

And, thirdly, how do we balance moral principles in relation to Belarus with strategic national interests?

These are questions that we need to answer collectively if, in the long run, we hope to find viable solutions to democratic transformation in Belarus. But before I attempt to do that, I will briefly describe Latvia's position on the subject. As the European Union representative in Belarus on behalf of the Austrian presidency, our job is to provide objective information for decision making by the European Union. We also support close coordination with the USA of all activities concerning Belarus. As a member of the European Union, we avoid high-level contacts with the Lukashenko regime but take advantage of non-political events to support Belarus citizen attendance at conferences, seminars, student exchanges, and trade organizations in Latvia. In particular, youth to youth organizations are very active and effective. However, Latvia, as a direct neighbour of Belarus, also has pragmatic relations with Belarus in the area of transit trade. From the perspective of a formerly occupied country, we have found that contacts at various levels foster, what I would call, creeping democracy. We, who are Belarus neighbours, know the country better and, in view of our complex past, are perhaps more experienced in helping to solve complex political situations in a difficult political environment.

Nonetheless, one of our common dilemmas regarding Belarus is this – while limiting formal political contacts, the European Union is fast becoming an important trading partner of Belarus, which is also being courted by EBRD for investment and credit possibilities. We need to take a common stand on whether these economic ties strengthen Lukashenko's dictatorship or hasten its end.

The situation in Belarus must also be viewed in the context of Belarus' and our relations with since our goals and interests appear to be quite different, with Russia politically and economically supporting the Lukashenko regime. Are we willing to demand that Russia, who will soon assume the presidency of the Council of Europe, confront Mr. Lukashenko on PACE recommendations and their implementation? Does Russia have the political will to enforce PACE standards in Belarus, when it often fails to comply herself? How actively Russia works with Belarus to implement PACE recommendations is, in my opinion, a litmus test of the success or failure of Russia's presidency of the Council of Europe, as well as a test of the legitimacy of this presidency.

There are so many of us involved in the Belarus question that coordination becomes an issue between and even within institutions as often Parliamentary Assemblies are want to address moral principle issues, while the Council of Ministers wishes to deal with Belarus on a more pragmatic basis. We are not in competition with each other as to who will be the one to achieve a democratic breakthrough in Belarus. Indeed we need to optimise existing efforts, avoiding duplication of human and financial resources. For example, NGO's in Latvia are finding it difficult to find matching funds within their own country for European Union, USA funded projects. We need to find a solution to these practical problems. We cannot afford to be told, as I was the other day by a young Latvian activist, that the European Union leaves the impression of being passive and unnoticed in efforts to democratise Belarus!

Lately, the frenetic activity around Belarus is driven by the coming presidential elections, whereas we should be thinking outside the box - beyond the elections - about unexplored opportunities for achieving creeping democracy and how to maintain Belarus on the international agenda so that a sustained democratic transformation process can mature. We need to think what we will do if, as a result of the election results, there is a confrontation between the people of Belarus and authorities, if the USA is increasingly preoccupied with the continuing crisis in the Middle East and detaches itself from supporting Belarus democratisation or,

in the European Union, indifference or mercantile self-interest take precedence over active involvement in Belarus.

Belarus is a member of the NATO PfP program, albeit a security agreement has not been signed. NATO, although not usually mentioned in the context of Belarus, is also the organization where the European Union, USA and Russia dialogue converges and could be the institution of choice to have a more direct influence on events in Belarus.

Over the years of his presidency, Mr. Lukashenko, utilizing repressive propaganda methods, has created the illusion among the majority of Belarus citizenry, that stability guards against the threatening insecurity of market reforms. As of yet, the people power, derived from a common national identity, necessary for a popular movement to depose Lukashenko simply lacks steam. In Belarus, russification under USSR is rooted most deeply because it was not counterbalanced by national communists. However, as I recently found out by watching a film on Belarus, there is a new generation of young people growing up in Belarus ready to fight for a better future. To them, and all others who cherish freedom, we who are gathered here, have to send a joint and coherent declaration that we hear them, we support their aspirations and we will not abandon them until Belarus is truly democratic.

Thank you.

PART III - A post-election strategy

Policy Paper

Roadmap for Democratic Belarus to Europe Prepared by Jaroslav Romanchuk, Vice-President of the Unified Civic Party of Belarus

The joint democratic forces of Belarus propose a significant shift in Belarus' foreign and domestic policy Belarus that would make a serious effort to integrate Belarus into the European community. Numerous opinion polls demonstrate that at least half of the population wishes to see Belarus turn toward Europe - this policy is the articulation of those desires.

This policy paper intends to detail Belarus' path to re-join Europe - to establish a clear vision and new approach to European policy. This includes major institutional and policy measures foreseen by the Democratic Forces of Belarus over the next fifteen years.

As a consequence of the efforts of the current regime most Belarusians lack clear understanding of Europe, its institutions and values and thus its import as a carrier of democratic and human values. However, the Democratic Forces of Belarus do understand the European Union's (European Union) current - post-Constitution situation. The roadmap for Belarus to Europe is therefore proposing the following stages keeping in mind the necessary steps to be made by Democratic Forces of Belarus and the European Union.

- Stage 1: European Values
- Stage 2: European Standards
- Stage 3: European Institutions

Stage 1: European Values

The first stage focuses on the promotion of European values; the ideological foundation of European Union. Protection of basic human rights and freedoms, democracy and market economy, active participation by citizens in political life and the local community should be introduced to the people of Belarus.

The goals and tasks for both Belarusian civil society and the European community are the following:

- Promote ideas and ideals of European values as: human dignity, fundamental rights, democracy, rule of law tolerance, respect for obligations and international law;
- Create an integrated reform-oriented dynamic community of people sharing fundamental European ideas and values,
- Broaden public policy debate;
- Assist the national elite to ensure stable, safe and consistent development of Belarusian society towards freedom and democracy;
- Form nation-wide consensus for strategic development of Belarus in the framework of European values and standards;
- Inform people of Belarus about European politics, economy, environment, science, social policies and culture.

The Democratic Forces of Belarus believe in the capacity of civil society organizations, educational institutions, youth organizations, think tanks and business associations to achieve the above mentioned goals. Cooperation between European foundations, universities, political parties, local governments and associations need to be increased and supported. Particular attention should be paid to supporting independent media and their coverage of European and Belarusian policies in the contest of common European values and standards.

Cooperation between the European Union and Belarus should be enhanced through TACIS and cross-borders programs. The European Parliament, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation for Europe (OSCE) should also be active implementers of joint Belarusian-European initiatives. Humanitarian projects, assistance for Chernobyl-related programs are also important elements of the

European Union-Belarusian integration process. However activities of international community on this stage should take into account the experience of European Union programs and initiatives in 1995 - 2005.

Stage 2: European Standards

Once Belarus becomes a free, democratic country, its government should join the European Neighborhood Program. Belarus should implement a program of systemic reforms, concentrate efforts on institution-building inside the country and on integrating into the programs and processes that are available for European countries outside European Union.

The priorities of the democratic government of Belarus will be the following:

- Joining the Council of Europe, and re-establishing full cooperation with the OSCE;
- Implement legislative changes to bring Belarusian legislation in line with the European Union's economic and trade standards;
- Introducing visa-free travel to Belarus for citizens from European Union and OECD countries;
- Adoption of European Union-Belarus program within the European Neighborhood Program (ENP);
- Getting market economy status from European Union;
- Joining WTO;
- Monetary and fiscal policy within the guidelines of the European Growth and Stability Pact;
- Joining the Bologna process to unify higher education standards between the European Union and Belarus;
- Increasing cooperation on migration, environment and security issues with the European Union;
- New cooperation in the energy sphere and on cross border issues;
- Learning from the experience of other post-communist states with regards to various economic reforms - including financial institutions, industry, agriculture, healthcare and pension reform.

Stage 3: European Institutions

By Stage Three, Belarus is a democratic market economy with high degree of compatibility with European Union. In the process of bilateral negotiations, Belarus and European Union should choose the form of institutional integration that corresponds best to the interests of the parties. At the beginning of this stage, Belarus and European Union should reach the status of sharing the so-called "four freedoms" (movement of goods, money, services and labor), but not join the European Union institutionally.

Belarus should join EFTA (European Union 25, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland) and/or the European Economic Area (European Union 25, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway) in order to form one internal market without sharing European Union institutions. Within such a setting Belarus would be able to adjust its structures and policies to those of European Union member states. These relations can be shaped either by bilateral or multilateral agreements that are in-line with WTO, EFTA or EEA requirements and standards. The question of full membership of Belarus in European Union will be put on the agenda only on the joint agreement between Belarus and the European Union. After such long-term development of relations between the parties it should be easier to make such institutional decision.

Belarus and the CIS:

Belarus will keep open economic relations with Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and other CIS countries in the framework of free trade area arrangement. At the same time further develop cooperation in the security sphere (migration, terrorism), education, energy, transport infrastructure development and other spheres within the CIS should be supported. These relations can be shaped either by bilateral or multilateral agreements that are in line with WTO, EFTA or EEA requirements and standards. With such settings Belarus will be function as new bridge between Europe and the CIS.

Belarus, Ukraine:

Belarus should enhance cooperation with Ukraine and Moldova in economic security, education, technology areas, thus set new regional cooperation in Eastern Europe. Regional cooperation should be based on EY guidelines for regional development. The tripartite projects will aim at preparing counties to working in competitive environment of European Union, sharing the benefits of regional division of labor and civil society's cooperation.

Joint statement by
Mr Cyril Svoboda, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic
and
Mr René van der Linden, PACE President

Belarus is the only European country which has not yet joined the Council of Europe, the pan-European organisation which represents the communality of European values.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has recently held an urgent debate on situation in Belarus on the eve of the presidential election, and has adopted Resolution 1482 and Recommendation 1734 (2006).

We, the undersigned, consider that it is a duty of all those – states and international organisations – who place the realisation of pluralist democracy, the compliance with the rule of law and the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms amongst their highest values to assist democratisation in this country.

We believe that the approach of the 2006 presidential election in Belarus represents an important moment for the international community to devise a long-term and co-ordinated strategy to pursue this objective, irrespective of what the electoral results might be.

We welcome the decision of the Belarusian authorities to invite the OSCE and other international organisations to monitor the elections and we call on the Belarusian authorities to ensure that the conduct of the electoral campaign and the vote fully comply with international standards of freedom and fairness.

We encourage the member States of the Council of Europe to strengthen their support for the further development of democratic forces and civil society in Belarus and to break the isolation of Belarusian people, by enhancing their access to pluralist media through broadcasting from abroad, by facilitating the issuance of visas for ordinary Belarusian citizens and offering more opportunities for scholarships and training on behalf of Belarusian students.

We support the creation of an Information Office/Centre of the Council of Europe in Belarus, with a view to promoting awareness among the Belarusian population at large of Council of Europe principles and values.

Finally, we call on all member States of the Council of Europe to join the efforts of the international community to promote democratic developments in Belarus and we count on the forthcoming Russian presidency of the Committee of Ministers to support this course of action.

PROGRAMME

22 February 2006

Winter Garden, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

7.00 pm

Welcome reception hosted by Mr Cyril SVOBODA, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic

23 February 2006

Grand Hall, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

8.30 – 9.00 am

Registration of participants

9.00 – 9.50 am

KEY-NOTE ADDRESSES

- Mr Cyril SVOBODA, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic (co-Chair of the conference)
- Mr René VAN DER LINDEN, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (co-Chair of the conference)
- Mr Eduard KUKAN, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Slovakia
- Mr Teodor BACONSCHI, State Secretary for Global Affairs of Romania, on behalf of the Chairman-in-Office of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe

9.50 am -12.00

PART I - Situation in Belarus on the eve of the 2006 presidential election

Introduction: Mr Andres HERKEL, Chair of the Sub-Committee on Belarus of the Political Affairs Committee of PACE

The situation of democratic forces, Mr Stanislav SUSHKEVICH, Chairman of Belarusian Social-Democratic Party

DEBATE

12.00- 12.30 pm

PRESS CONFERENCE

12.00 – 1.30 pm

Lunch hosted by President VAN DER LINDEN

1.45 – 4.00 pm

PART II - Place of Belarus in democratic Europe

Introduction: a Council of Europe perspective: Mrs Maud DE BOER-BUQUICCHIO, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe

Key-note speeches:

- Ms Barbara TUGE-ERECINSKA, Secretary of State of Foreign Affairs of Poland
- Ms Vaira PAEGLE, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia

DEBATE

4.00 – 4.15 pm

COFFEE BREAK

4.15 – 5.45 pm

PART III – A post-election strategy

Mr Yaroslav ROMANCHUK, Vice-President of the Unified Civic Party of Belarus

DEBATE

5.45 – 6.00 pm

CONCLUSIONS

Joint statement by Minister SVOBODA and President VAN DER LINDEN

23 February 2006

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

1. HOSTS

Mr Cyril SVOBODA, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Czech Republic

Mr René VAN DER LINDEN, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)

2. MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC

a) Delegation

Mr Jaroslav BAŠTA, 1st Deputy Minister

Mrs Vlasta ŠTĚPOVÁ, Permanent Representative of the Czech Republic to the CE

Mr Jaromír PLÍŠEK, Director General, Territorial Section I

Mrs Veronika STROMŠÍKOVÁ, Director, Department of Human Rights

Mr Tomáš SZUNYOG, Director, Department of South Eastern and Eastern Europe

Ms Gabriela DLOUHÁ, Head of Transition Promotion Unit

b) Staff

Ms Adéla SÝKOROVÁ, Transition Promotion Unit

Ms Helena ŠTOHANZLOVÁ, Transition Promotion Unit

Mr Marek TOMAN, Transition Promotion Unit

Mr Martin BOUČEK, Department of Human Rights

3. MINISTERS OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OR THEIR REPRESENTATIVES, AND ACCOMPANYING STAFF

Estonia

Mr Raul MÄLK, Director General of the Policy Planning Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Hungary

Mr László SZÖKE, Deputy State Secretary

Mr Ferenc KONTRA, Desk-officer for Belarus

Latvia

Ms Vaira PAEGLE, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs

Romania

Mr Teodor BACONCHI, State Secretary for Global Affairs of Romania, on behalf of the Chairman-in-Office of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe*

Mr Petr STAMATESCU, MFA

Mr Cristian URSE, MFA

Slovakia

Mr Eduard KUKAN, Minister of Foreign Affairs

Mr Igor MAUKS, Cabinet of the Minister

Mr Stefan ROZKOPÁL, Director of the 3rd Territorial Section

Ukraine

Mr Igor PROKOPTCHUK, Deputy Director of the Second Territorial Directorate General

Mr Serghei MOROZOV, 2nd Secretary of the Political Department

4. COUNCIL OF EUROPE

a) PACE – AD HOC COMMITTEE OF THE BUREAU TO TAKE PART IN THE CONFERENCE ON BELARUS

Mr Abdülkadir ATEŞ, Turkey, SOC
Mr Mikko ELO, Finland, SOC
Mr Andres HERKEL, Estonia, EPP/CD
Mr Josef JAŘAB, Czech Republic, ALDE
Mr Victor KOLESNIKOV, Russian Federation, EDG
Mr Andrew McINTOSH, SOC, United Kingdom
Mr Murat MERCAN, Turkey, EPP/CD
Mr Julio PADILLA, Spain, EPP/CD
Mr Vojtech TKÁČ, Slovakia, SOC
Mrs Birute VESAITE, Lithuania, SOC
Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS, Lithuania, EDG

b) COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS*

Mr Teodor BACONSCHI, State Secretary for Global Affairs of Romania, on behalf of the Chairman-in-Office of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe

c) SECRETARIAT

Mrs Maud DE BOER-BUQUICCHIO, Deputy Secretary General
Mr Plamen NIKOLOV, Advisor, Directorate of Political Advice and Cooperation, Directorate General of Political Affairs
Ms Dana BEKOVÁ, Information Centre of the Council of Europe, Prague

PACE Secretariat

Mr Petr SICH, Head of the President's Private Office
Mrs Agnieszka NACHILO, Secretary, Political Affairs Committee
Mr Francisc FERRER, Communication Unit
Mrs Victoria LEE, Assistant, Political Affairs Committee

5. PARLIAMENTARY DELEGATION FROM THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Mr Jiří MAŠTÁLKA, MEP

6. BELARUS

Mr Stanislav SUSHKEVICH, Chairman of the Belarusian Social-Democratic Party, Representative of the Single Candidate for international relations, Head of delegation

Mr Syarhey KALIAKYN, Chairman of Communist Party of Belarus
Mr Syarhey MATSKEVICH, Head of working group of Assembly of Democratic non-governmental Organizations
Mr Yaroslav ROMANCHUK, Vice-President of the Unified Civic Party
Mr Vintsuk VIACHORKA, Chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF), responsible for international relations in the Private Office of the Single Candidate

7. DIPLOMATIC REPRESENTATIVES TO THE CZECH REPUBLIC

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Austria | Mrs Margot KLESTIL-LÖFLER, Ambassador Mr Harald SCHEU, Attaché for European Union Affairs |
| Belarus | Mr Mikalai BARYSEVICH, Chargé d'Affaires |
| Bulgaria | Ms Margareta GANEVA |
| Estonia | Mrs Eve-Küll KALA, Ambassador Mr Meelis KORKA, 3 rd Secretary |
| France | Mr Charles MALINAS, 1st Counsellor Mr Philippe RAY, 1st Secretary Mr Igor SOULIGOUX, intern Mr Patrick ROBERT |
| Germany | Mr Helmut ELFENKÄMPER, Ambassador Mr Konrad SCHARINGER |
| Hungary | Mr István SZABÓ, Ambassador |
| Lithuania | Mr Romualdas KOZYROVIČIUS, Ambassador |
| Latvia | Mrs Iveta ŠULCA, Ambassador |
| Moldova | Mr Ivan ZINOVIEV, Charge d'Affaires a.i. of the Republic of Moldova in the Czech Republic |
| Poland | Mr Marzena KRAJEWSKA, 2 nd Secretary Mr Grzegorz BOCHENEK, Counsellor |
| Romania | Mr Gheorghe TINCA, Ambassador Mr Dan BALANESCU, Counsellor |
| Russia | Mr Alexey Leonidovich FEDOTOV, Ambassador Mr Denis GRISHCHENKO, 1 st Secretary Mr Mikhail SMIRNOV, 2 nd Secretary |
| Slovakia | Ms Karla WURSTEROVA, 2 nd Secretary |
| Switzerland | Mr Jacques Bernard DUCREST, Counsellor |
| Turkey | Mr Muzaffer ÖZYILDIS, 1 st Counsellor |
| Ukraine | Mr Ivan Dmytrovyč KULEBA |
| USA | Ms Sarah C. PECK, 2 nd Secretary |

8. NGOs/IGOs/Experts

Mr Jan MARIN, Association for International Affairs, Czech Republic
Mr Pavol DEMEŠ, German Marshall Fund of the United States
Mr Luboš VESELÝ, People in Need, Czech Republic
Mr Vladislav JANDJUK, Skaryna, Czech Republic

9. INTERPRETERS

Ms Catherine Margaret GAY
Mr Boris GORBENKO
Ms Irène MARKOWICZ
Ms Valleria SHEYNIN-AGIUS
Mr Leonid VEKCHINE
Ms Natasha WARD