EU/Belarus relations: prospects for a future partnership

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The Council adopted the following declaration on Belarus and its relations with OSCE: at its meeting on 21 October 2002, the Council of the EU expressed serious concern about the situation of democracy and human rights in Belarus and adopted the following declaration. The EU emphasises the importance for all European States of respect for human rights and freedoms, as guaranteed in the UN Charter and embodied in the Helsinki Final Act. In Belarus, the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group (AMG) in Minsk has a vital role to play in assisting the Government of Belarus and civil society in promoting democratic institutions and in complying with other OSCE commitments as well as monitor and report on this process. The EU has consistently supported the Portuguese Chair of OSCE in its efforts to solve the impasse regarding the AMG in Minsk. It believes that the Chair has already shown great flexibility in trying to find a solution to the problems that have arisen as a result of Belarus' treatment of the AMG. The EU cannot accept the Belarusian position that the AMG should be formally closed before negotiations on a new OSCE presence can begin. It supports the Chair's view that the AMG's 1997-mandate remains in force, in full, until there is consensus in the OSCE Permanent Council to amend or replace it. Furthermore, the EU has noted the commitment made in September by M. Khvostov to enter into negotiations with a view to the continued operation of the AMG. The EU urges the Belarusian authorities to enter into immediate, meaningful and result-oriented negotiations. In addition, the EU requests the Government of Belarus immediately to extend the accreditation of the remaining member of the diplomatic staff of the Mission beyond 29 October 2002, or alternatively to extend accreditation to a replacement, with a view to avoiding disruption to the activities of the Mission. If the Government of Belarus fails to indicate its agreement to this request by 29 October, this will seriously effect not only relations with the OSCE, but also the development of relations between Belarus and the EU. The EU remains deeply concerned at the lack of progress in democratic reform and the growing deterioration of individual freedoms and rights of expression in Belarus; should, in addition, the AMG be unable to continue its work, the EU will be obliged to review its relations with Belarus and envisage further specific measures. If, on the other hand, an adequate solution allowing for the effective and lasting operation of the AMG was found, the EU could take this as a new starting point for discussions on the improvement of its relations with Belarus. The EU expresses readiness to continue to work closely with the Chair to ensure that the OSCE can contribute to the development of genuine democracy and full respect for human rights in Belarus, including through an active OSCE presence. Lastly, the Council of the EU will consider the evolution of the situation in Belarus at its meeting on 18/19 November 2002.