

# Belarus Headlines

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Office for a Democratic  
Belarus

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## **The Movement for Freedom and the Office for a Democratic Belarus Launched a Campaign for the Reduction of Schengen Visa Costs for Belarusian Citizens**



OFFICE FOR A  
DEMOCRATIC BELARUS  
BRUSSELS

- 1 The Movement for Freedom and the Office for a Democratic Belarus (Brussels) today sent out letters to all governments of the countries -- signatories to the Schengen Agreement with an appeal to re-examine their policies regarding fees and procedures of issuing Schengen visas for Belarusian citizens.
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Addressing Ministers of Foreign and Internal Affairs, as well as several Heads of States, chairman of the Movement for Freedom Aliaksandr Milinkevich and director of the ODB Olga Stuzhinskaya describe difficulties experienced by Belarusians in obtaining EU visas after the expansion of the Schengen zone. The increased fee and the intensifying complexities of application procedures result into drastic decrease of the number of visas issued to citizens of Belarus, authors of the text say. The current situation fosters a sense of isolation of Belarusians and consolidates a negative image of the EU among them. The current visa policy, reads the letter, contradicts the European Union's policy of engagement with Belarusian society and fuels the Belarusian authorities' propaganda claiming that Europe



**Say YES**  
to cheaper visas  
for Belarusians

“does not care” for Belarus.

The Movement for Freedom and the ODB strongly believe that the way the EU member states address the visa issue in Belarus will prove to be one of the crucial factors concerning the future of Belarus and its people. Thus, in their joint letter, Mr Milinkevich and Ms Stuzhinskaya request support for the introduced earlier proposal by the Visegrad group advocating a flat reduction of visa fees as a unilateral step by the EU. Authors also express hope that the visa issue will receive the necessary attention during the upcoming Czech presidency and will be resolved in a manner facilitating and liberalising the process of granting Schengen visas for all citizens of Belarus.

Appeal of the Movement for Freedom and the Office for a Democratic Belarus has been supported by more than 70 associations and individuals.

We on the Web

[www.democraticbelarus.eu](http://www.democraticbelarus.eu)

25.11.2008

Source: ODB

## Round-table Entitled “The Recent Policy Swift in Belarus-EU Relations: Probation Period for Lukashenka”



In the framework of the project “Support to independent media in Belarus”, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung together with the Office for a Democratic Belarus organized a discussion, entitled “The Recent Policy Swift in Belarus-EU Relations: Probation Period for Lukashenka”.

The workshop touched upon current issues affecting Belarus’ relations with the EU. What can the European Union offer and what can it expect from the Belarusian authorities? Is the situation of media freedom and freedom of assembly on the list of conditions for the

Belarus-EU dialogue, and how the situation has changed since the recent partial suspension of sanctions against Belarus officials? These were the questions discussed by representatives of Belarus’ independent media outlets, members of the EU-based think tanks and non-governmental groups, as well as European diplomats.

Belarusian journalists noted some positive changes that took place in the country in the past months, including the return of newspapers *Nasha Niva* and *Narodnaya Volya* to printing houses and kiosks. However, they also spoke about numerous problems related to accreditation of journalists, economic conditions for existence of independent printed and Internet-based media, and many other difficulties they encounter on daily basis when exercising their professional duty. Media representatives also mentioned that in its dialogue with the Belarusian government the European Union should not

only pay attention to the question of changes in the electoral and media regulations, but should also stress the importance of establishing the rule of law. Although Belarusian legislation does not seem to require many changes, the implementation of legislative norms is lagging behind.

The Belarusian delegates welcomed the dialogue path in today’s relations between the EU and Belarus and the positive steps made by the government of Belarus. At the same time, they expressed their strong wish to see the process being maximally transparent and with the inclusion of civil society groups and the political opposition in the country. Journalists expressed their hope that the EU follows its current line towards Belarus, and that the pragmatism and value-based approach continues going hand in hand.

26.11.2008

Source: ODB

## NATO PA Session in Valencia

As part of its activities related to information exchange and networking, the Office for a Democratic Belarus attended the 54th Annual Session of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, which was held in Valencia (Spain) on 14-18 November 2008.

The NATO Parliamentary Assembly is an inter-parliamentary organisation that brings together legislators from the 26 member states of the North Atlantic Alliance and 13 associate members, including the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Georgia, and the Middle Eastern states. The Assembly serves as a forum for international dialogue on a wide range of security, political and economic issues pertaining to the scope of the Alliance’s agenda. Its principal objective is to facilitate parliamentary awareness and understanding of key security challenges and NATO policies, and to provide parliamentary oversight over these policies, thereby assuming a degree of collective responsibility. Since the end of the Cold War, representatives from non-

member nations have also had the opportunity to take part in NATO PA’s work and to contribute to the debate on the security challenges facing the Alliance and the world community. This participation has also provided both Alliance aspirants and countries seeking co-operation rather than membership with political and practical assistance in the development of mechanisms and practices necessary for the effective democratic control of the armed forces.

Among the topics discussed by some 350 parliamentarians attending the Valencia Session were the challenges of enlargement, the Alliance’s military transformation, the operation in Afghanistan, and the new security threats such as piracy and energy security. Particular attention in the debates received the Russian-Georgian conflict of August 2008 and the future of NATO-Russian relations. While acknowledging the achievements of NATO-Russia co-operation and partnership, a resolution adopted at the

Plenary Session expressed grave concern over ‘Russia’s disproportionate use of force in Georgia in August 2008 and the failure to comply swiftly with ceasefire agreements’. It nonetheless urged NATO member states ‘to re-establish wide-ranging co-operation with Russia’ and stressed that this partnership needs to ‘rest upon common values, particularly respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states and the peaceful resolution of conflicts’.

A separate resolution on the conflict between the Russian Federation and Georgia recognised that ‘the facts surrounding the outbreak of the hostilities...have not been authoritatively established’ and recommended that NATO governments and parliaments ‘contribute to an independent international inquiry to determine the chain of events that led to this conflict’. and recommended that NATO governments and parliaments ‘contribute to an independent international inquiry to determine the chain of events that led to this conflict’. **Continued on p. 3**

## NATO PA Session in Valencia (continuation)



*Jaap de Hoop Scheffer*

In his address to the Assembly, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer said the Alliance would not want to choose between good relations with Russia and further enlargement. 'Trustful NATO-Russia relations are a strategic asset – a boon to European and indeed global security', noted de Hoop Scheffer. He also admitted that the Caucasus conflict showed that the relationship requires serious revision but admitted that "no business as usual" still means "business", as both sides have an incentive to co-operate, particularly in dealing with common challenges such as arms control, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and terrorism. Nevertheless, NATO Secretary General assured the delegates that the Alliance's approach to enlargement would not undergo a fundamental change, thereby confirming the adherence to the decisions of the Bucharest Summit regarding Georgia and Ukraine's prospects to join NATO in the future.

The President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, suggested that it was the ambiguity of the message from Bucharest, and the absence of unity among European powers on the issue of NATO membership for his country, that sent the 'wrong signal' to Moscow. He described Russian aggression against Georgia as 'the most flagrant violation of international law since the Second World War'. In his opinion, the conflict should not be seen as an isolated case, and Europe could see more 'Georgias'. Refuting the claims that it was Georgia that fired first shot, President Saakashvili said his country acted solely in self-defence

Although President Saakashvili underlined the importance for the Georgians of receiving a clear signal from the Alliance that they were on the path to membership, he assured the audience that, regardless of the outcome of the NATO foreign ministers meeting in December 2008, Georgia is determined to further pursue the reform process it has embarked on in the aftermath of the Rose Revolution.

Particular attention deserves an excellent presentation by Maria Lipman from the Moscow office of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Lipman's thought provoking paper traced changes in the correlation between Russia's foreign and domestic policies, from the late Perestroika period to the present day. She demonstrated how the foreign policy of the early Yeltsin era, which was a reflection of 'political pluralism and an unconstrained freedom' that existed at home, has changed with the advent to power of Vladimir Putin. Resentful over the weakened state, Putin has quickly come to rely on 'a traditional vision of the Russian statehood with centralised power and a dominant figure at the top'. He has embarked on a campaign neutralising all potential challengers to his power and ensured control over political parties and the legislature. While describing his policy as pragmatic and aiming to use Russia's rich natural resources to the best advantage of the nation, Lipman pointed out that the complex internal situation and the ambiguous image of the West as a partner and, simultaneously, as an adversary, as well as the desire to re-assert Russia's influence in the post-Soviet space often got in

the way of Putin's foreign policy agenda. Anti-Western, anti-American sentiments have gradually come to constitute the 'primary tool of domestic policies' and the foreign policy has become the main driving force of policies at home. 'The military conflict [with Georgia] that was perceived as a clash with the US was a perfect embodiment of the world view of Russia as a besieged fortress', said Lipman. She noted that Russia's quick victory inspired among its people 'a sense of pride and moral righteousness' and provided 'a genuine and overwhelming public support' to the ruling elite, but stressed that the conflict 'posed a grave challenge to the modernisation, integrationist mode of Russia's development'.

Although Belarus was not on the official agenda of the NATO PA session in Valencia, the repercussions of the Russian-Georgian conflict and the further developments in relations between NATO and Russia would undoubtedly have a serious impact on the situation in this country. 'Europe should learn one lesson from the events in Caucasus – we cannot pretend not seeing again what is happening in Belarus, and then, having woken up one day, start expressing interest in the ways to return to the status quo ante', said Lithuania's Foreign Ministry Undersecretary Lai-monas Talat-Kelpsa in his recent interview to ELTA. According to the Lithuanian diplomat, Russia has already started applying the policy of 'handwringing': 'the Belarusian authority is forced to take huge loans and give away strategic assets'. It is therefore crucial that the West develops a clear position on this process and reacts in an appropriate way, urged Talat-Kelpsa.



*Mikheil Saakashvili*

24/11/2008

Source: ODB

Photos by Isabelle Arcis



## Politics and Society

### Ban on Belarusian Children's Travel to Ireland May be Lifted



The Belarusian authorities' ban on the travel of children affected by the Chernobyl nuclear accident to Ireland may be lifted soon, *The Irish Times* reported.

"Our primary belief is that this matter will be resolved in good time and that a decision concerning these issues will be taken in the very near future, and possibly this week," the said the Belarusian ambassador to Belgium, Uladzimir

Syanko, following his talks in Brussels with MEP Eoin Ryan of Ireland.

"There is a positive mood in Minsk towards Irish partners," the Ambassador told reporters in Brussels on November 11. "The government of Belarus regards Ireland and NGO groupings as a concrete partner."

Mr. Ryan was quoted as saying that he was confident that a deal would be struck in the next few days. "They have had problems with Belgium, Italy and the US, but they were definitely signaling an exception will be made for Ireland," said the Irish MEP.

More than 2,500 children who live in Chernobyl-affected areas visit Ireland every year. Chernobyl Aid Ireland wants to organize trips to Ireland for

100 Belarusian children this Christmas.

This past October, Alyaksandr Lukashenka issued an edict stipulating that Belarusian children may travel aboard on a health break under Chernobyl programs only to countries that have concluded with the Belarusian government an agreement that guarantees the return of the children.

The Belarusian authorities suspended the foreign trips of children under such programs after a 16-year-old Belarusian girl failed to show up for a flight home from the United States in August and said that she wanted to stay in California.

13/11/2008

Source: BelaPAN

### Presidential Administration Head Criticizes Isolation of Belarus, Pledges Media Changes



*Uladzimir Makey*

The head of the Presidential Administration criticized the isolation of Belarus by the West and promised "positive steps" on the part of the country's authorities in the media market.

"Belarus, an integral part of Europe, has been absolutely undeservingly facing economic and political pressure for many years, becoming a source for the production of sinister and fantastic thrillers," the head, Uladzimir Makey, said at the opening of the 11th Minsk Forum on Thursday.

Mr. Makey called for an "unbiased look" at Belarus.

"Hardly anyone will deny that Belarus is making a significant contribution into the security of Europe thanks to its sustainable social and economic growth, concord in society, well-balanced and peaceful foreign policy course," he said.

For the first time a head of the Presidential Administration accepted the invitation of the Minsk-based German embassy to take part in the annual forum.

Mr. Makey repeated the authorities' mantra that they were ready for a sincere dialogue with the European Union based on equality and mutual respect.

He expressed the opinion that it made no sense for the West to continue the isolation of Belarus, describing the past years of the isolation as lost.

He said Belarus and the European Union had now a "unique opportunity" to improve relations. "Processes that seemed to be highly unlikely three years ago are possible now.

Perhaps, something what seems to be unlikely today will become possible tomorrow. Who knows?" Mr. Makey said.

He denied that there had been political prisoners in the country. Those regarded by some as such had been convicted on criminal charges, he stressed adding that "Law is equal for everyone. A different thing is that it can run counter to democratic reality that is needed. Then, it should be changed."

The official said that economic matters were a key priority for Belarus in relations with the EU, expressing confidence that the Belarusians "are able to make a significant contribution to the development of common Europe."

Mr. Makey assured the audience that the authorities of Belarus were paying heed to criticism to "remedy flaws and constantly improve the political and economic system."

14/11/2008

Source: naviny.by

## Politics and Society

### Belarus Denies Seeking To Counter US Missile Shield

Belarus denied it was planning to acquire Russian Iskander missiles in retaliation for the controversial U.S. missile shield planned in eastern Europe.

A report in The Wall Street Journal last week had an "absolutely incorrect interpretation" of comments by Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka over the acquisition of the missiles, the foreign ministry said.

Instead, Lukashenka's comments about his country's plans to acquire the Iskander

short-range conventional missiles were meant in the context of a "general re-arming of the Belarusian army," reports the ministry. The Wall Street Journal said it stood by its story.

"The Journal article notes Mr. Lukashenka's support for Russian plans to target any U.S. missile system in Europe with Iskander missiles. It further notes that Mr. Lukashenka was considering deploying Iskander missiles. It did not seek to link the two

issues in any way," reads the statement of the newspaper.

In the interview, Lukashenka "made no statements about our country's intent to host Russian Iskander missiles in Belarus as a retaliatory measure for U.S. moves to deploy a missile-defence system in Europe," said the statement.

16/11/2008

Source: AFP

### Belarus, Lithuania May Sign Agreement that Exempts Residents of Border Areas from Visa Requirement for Short-Distance Trips



Belarus and Lithuania may sign an agreement in early

2009 that would exempt citizens resident in border areas from the visa requirement for short-distance trips, said Andrey Papow, Spokesperson of Foreign Ministry of Belarus.

The agreement may take effect as early as the summer of 2009 if the two countries move promptly to ratify it, he said.

Talks to finalize the agreement are expected to take place by the end of 2008.

Belarusian and Lithuanian diplomats have held two meetings to discuss the draft accord, but there are still some issues that have not been agreed upon, said Mr. Papow.

The agreement would help relieve a certain tension that was caused by an increase in the price of Lithuanian visas following the country's accession to the Schengen travel zone and Belarus' move to raise its visa fees

accordingly, explained Mr. Papow.

He further added that agreement would allow border areas' residents with a special permit to move freely in areas within 30 to 50 kilometers of the border on both sides. However, not all village soviets located there will be covered by the agreement, he noted.

The holders of special permits would be allowed to enter and move within the territorial unit indicated in the permit.

24/11/2008

Source: Trade News

### Next Presidential Election Will Be Held on February 8, 2011 at Latest



Mikalai Lazavik

The next presidential election will be held no later than February 8, 2011, said Mikalay Lazavik, Secretary of the Central Election Commission.

The official stated that the next local elections would be held on December 14, 2010 at the latest.

"Presidential elections are called by the House of Representatives no later than five months and are held no later than two months before the expiry of the incumbent president's term in office. The president was sworn into office on April 8, 2006 and, hence, the next election should take place on February 8, 2011 at the latest," said Mr. Lazavik.

He noted that the next presidential election could take place before the deadline but did not say whether the government would hold the next local and presidential elections on the same day.

"Holding the presidential and local elections on the same day would be undesirable as voters would focus all of their attention on the main election campaign," he said but added, however, that this would help the government save public funds.

Mr. Lazavik stressed that the central election commission would "accept any decision."

25/11/2008

Source: BelaPAN

## Finance and Economics

### Fitch Affirms Belarus at "B - "

Fitch Ratings has today affirmed Belarusbank's (BBK) Long-term foreign currency Issuer Default rating (IDR) at 'B-' (B minus). A full list of rating actions follows at the end of this commentary.

The rating action reflects Fitch's current opinion that the impact of international financial market turmoil and a likely global recession on Belarus's public finances, economy and banking sector will probably be within the tolerance level of the 'B-' (B minus) ratings currently assigned to the country's state-owned banks. Fitch also notes that external events have as yet had a limited negative influence on BBK's performance and financial position.

BBK's stand-alone credit profile benefits from its dominant position in key sectors of the domestic market and the stability of its customer base. Improved internal capital generation since 2006 on the back of a reduced tax burden and adequate asset quality to date (loans overdue by 90 days at

end-H108: 1.4%) are also viewed as a positive for the bank's stand-alone financial position. Customer funding is mainly composed of retail deposits (end-H108: 52%) and government funding (23%), while foreign funding generally represents a small portion of the bank's liabilities, limiting refinancing risk.

BBK is actively engaged in state lending programmes, in particular in the retail sector, with some of them bearing concessional interest rates. BBK's corporate loan book is widely represented by the leading domestic state-owned enterprises from the manufacturing industry. Although concentrations are high, most of the large companies are state-owned and may be able to receive support from the government, in case of need. Nevertheless, Fitch notes that the challenging operating environment, low loan impairment reserve coverage, weak cost efficiency and only moderate capitalisation are constraints for BBK's stand-alone credit profile.

Ongoing global deleveraging has high-

lighted the Belarusian economy's weak external liquidity and high dollarization. Fitch notes that the Belarusian authorities have already reached an agreement with Russia to receive a USD2bn long-term loan and opened negotiations with the IMF for a support package. The agreement with Russia and potential support from the IMF could bolster the sovereign's financial position, and therefore its ability to provide support to the country's state-owned banks, but the ability to provide such support could be constrained by further negative shocks. BBK is the largest universal bank in Belarus in terms of assets, holding a 41% market share at end-H108. BBK has a strong presence in both retail and corporate segments: at end-H108 the bank had a 59% market share in retail deposits, 70% of the retail lending market, and 32% of corporate lending. A total 99.8% of the bank's equity is held by the state.

13/11/2008

**Source: Bond Market Information**

### RF, Belarus Switch to Rouble Operations in Oil, Gas Exports

Russia and Belarus agreed to switch to Russian roubles to pay for oil and gas supplies, Belarusian Vice-Premier Andrei Kobyakov said after the talks with Russian Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin on Thursday. He stressed that this step would be Belarus' contribu-

tion to giving a Russian rouble the status of regional currency.

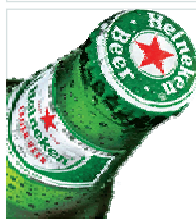
Replying to a question on the time when the parties would switch to rouble operations, Kudrin said that some companies already use roubles. He under-

lined that the transition to the rouble as base currency for operations should be a voluntary decision for companies.

14/11/2008

**Source: Itar-Tass**

### Heineken: Brewer Taps into Local Tastes



Babruisk was not always welcoming to foreigners. In 1812, the central Belarusian town's fortress defied a 12,000-strong detachment of Napoleon's Grande Armee

for four months on his retreat from Moscow.

Things are different now. The town's

Syabar brewery has, since December, been owned by Heineken, the world's fourth-largest brewer by volume, which bought it from a consortium of Russian-American private equity investors and the International Finance Corporation, the World Bank's private-sector arm, for an undisclosed price.

A whirlwind programme of modernisation and expansion has ensued. The measures helped raise Syabar's annual

production capacity by nearly 50 per cent to 1.3m hectolitres this year. A further increase to 2m hectolitres next year is planned.

In May, Heineken also bought a 51 per cent stake in a 525,000 hl/year brewery in Rechitsa for €6m (\$8m). It now accounts for 24 per cent of Belarusian beer output.

**Continued on p. 7**

## Finance and Economics

### Heineken: Brewer Taps into Local Taste

The speed of development at Bobruisk reflects the familiarity of the routine for Heineken, which has spent heavily on expanding in other parts of central and eastern Europe, including Russia and Ukraine, the markets that Belarus most resembles. What represents a vital process of catch-up for local industry is, for the investor, now just the filling-in of a blank spot on the map.

"Our position and strategy in Belarus is very similar to the one we have in the rest of the region," says Nico Nusmeir, head of Heineken's CEE operations.

The government first agreed to sell a controlling stake in Krinitsa, the country's largest brewery, to Baltic Beverages Holding in return for \$50m of investments. It then retroactively decided it would transfer only 30 per

cent. BBH - then a joint venture of Scottish & Newcastle and Carlsberg - walked away from the deal and tried to put Krinitsa into bankruptcy proceedings to recover the \$10.5m it had already invested, but a Minsk court refused to hear the suit.

18/11/2008

Source: The Financial Times

### Belarus Investment Forum Exceeded Expectations, Says Prime Minister



The Belarus Investment Forum has exceeded all expectations of its organizers, Prime Minister Syarhey Sidorski

told reporters in London on Tuesday.

The November 18 event was originally expected to draw about 200 participants but more than 370 took part, said the press office of the Belarusian Council of Ministers.

The final number of participants pro-

vides the strongest evidence that European businesses are getting increasingly interested in projects in Belarus, added Mr. Sidorski.

The premier said "realistic projects" had been offered to investors, while the Belarusian delegation had touted the openness of the country's economy. "We have done everything to ensure that they [the participants] not only hear but also sense the spirit of changes taking place in Belarus. All participants said they were ready to invest in our country. Investors, including those in the Arab world, have a huge interest in working in Belarus,"

reports the press office.

Mr. Sidorski noted that he had met with top managers of a number of companies to discuss specific projects during the forum. In particular, the US-based Caterpillar equipment maker would like to move some of its plants to Belarus, he revealed.

While in London, Mr. Sidorski met with Caroline Flint, Britain's minister of state for Europe, British MPs and business-people.

20/11/2008

Source: BelaPAN

### Belarus Sees IMF Deal this Year, FX Policy Changes

Belarus expects to finish talks with the IMF for a \$2 billion loan by the end of the year, with currency policy adjustments one of conditions for clinching the deal, the central bank's deputy chief said on Thursday.

Belarus has asked the International Monetary Fund for a \$2 billion loan as a precautionary measure to guard the former Soviet state against the impact of the global financial crisis. It has said it may not use the funds.

"We expect the (IMF) mission's return in December, it will be in the middle of the month... We think it will be the last mission," Pavel Kallaur told journalists.

"The International Monetary Fund has

highlighted the need for appropriate adjustments of the exchange rate, taking into account the fluctuations of global currencies."

The Belarusian rouble has been fixed to the dollar this year within a range of 2,100-2,200, with a recommended floor of 2,150. On Thursday, the rate was 2,156/\$, weaker than that limit.

The central bank switched to the dollar peg from a previous Russian rouble link. It has talked of fixing the domestic currency to a basket of the dollar, euro and the Russian rouble as of next year.

"The IMF has thinks the move to a currency basket is positive," Kallaur said, adding he does not rule out

"additional adjustments in monetary policy" should the situation on global markets change further".

The authorities previously said another IMF demand was cutting state spending. Fiscal prudence, as well as bank recapitalisation, were key demands of the Fund when it agreed to loan neighbouring Ukraine \$16.4 billion earlier this month.

Russia revived an idea of creating a common currency with Belarus when it agreed to loan Minsk \$2 billion this and next year. Belarusian authorities made few statements on that issue.

27/11/2008

Source: The Guardian



## EU and Belarus

### EU Welcomes Belarusian Initiative to Make Concrete Step towards Democratization and Call to Release Barazenska

EU Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy **Benita Ferrero-Waldner** commenting a non-paper received from the Belarusian authorities made the following statement:  
 "I welcome the announcement of Belarus on 19 November to take concrete steps to allow the printing and distribution of the two independent newspapers "Narodnaia Volia" and "Nasha Niva" and to discuss the international norms with regard to the internet media. I also welcome Belarus' readiness to discuss in detail OSCE/ODIHR recommendations regarding the improvement of the electoral legislation. These are important and encouraging steps from Belarus and I am looking forward to their swift implementation as well as additional steps announced by Belarus in line with the EU's expectations."

Chairman of the delegation on relations with Belarus in the European Parliament **Jacek Protasiewicz** also welcomed the non-paper and stressed that "it is a very important signal from Minsk" that proves "the seriousness of its intentions to improve the relations with the EU". "We will be looking forward to witnessing the practical implementation of the promised steps during the six-month period of the partial suspension of the EU targeted sanctions," said he.

Referring to President Lukashenka's declaration on November 11 in the interview for The Wall Street Journal about his readiness to free all existing political prisoners, Mr. Protasiewicz called for "immediate release of young opposition activist Alyaksandr Barazenska, who is held in custody pending his trial over the January's demonstration, despite his voluntary appearance at the Minsk city police department on October 27th for questioning".

20-24/11/2008

Source: [eupopar.europa.eu](http://eupopar.europa.eu), [ec.europa.eu](http://ec.europa.eu)

### OSCEO/ODIHR Election Monitoring Mission Issues Final Report



Following a timely invitation from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus to observe the 28 September 2008 parliamentary elections, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) deployed an Election Observation Mission (EOM) to Belarus on 12 August 2008, consisting of 15 experts and 40 long-term observers, further supplemented by 308 short-term observers prior to election day. The OSCE/ODIHR EOM assessed compliance of the election process with OSCE commitments and other international standards as well as with Belarus' domestic legislation. For election day, the OSCE/ODIHR joined efforts with the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) to form the OSCE EOM. In total, the OSCE EOM included 449 short-term observers from 43

participating States.

In its Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, the OSCE EOM concluded that while "the authorities gave a number of clear signals of their interest to improve the election process [...] these elections ultimately fell short of OSCE commitments for democratic elections." While "there were some minor improvements, which could indicate a step forward", the OSCE EOM noted that "further substantial efforts are required if Belarus is to conduct genuinely democratic elections in line with OSCE commitments."

During these elections, the co-operation extended to the OSCE/ODIHR EOM by the authorities was considerably improved. This could serve as the basis for a close post-election dialogue to advance consideration of a number of outstanding OSCE/ODIHR recommendations that could substantially contribute to bringing the election process in Belarus closer in line with its OSCE commitments.

Positive steps included the slightly increased access of opposition representatives to District

Election Commissions (DECs), a decision to repeat once the five-minute candidate spots on regional branches of the National State Television and Radio Company during

prime time, and a recommendation by the Central Election Commission (CEC) to seal ballot box slots overnight during the five-day early voting period. Some opposition candidates noted progress in their ability to conduct meetings in authorised locations without interference.

Nevertheless, the election environment in Belarus, as created by the present election legislation, still did not allow genuine political competition and equal treatment of election competitors by the authorities. Serious concerns remain pertaining to fundamental rights of freedom of assembly and expression, and access to a plurality of views, constituting meaningful information necessary for voters to make an informed choice. The legislative framework continues to present obstacles to the conduct of elections in line with OSCE commitments. Previous concerns regarding the Electoral Code (EC), as expressed in past OSCE/ODIHR and Council of Europe Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) reports and legal opinions, remain to be addressed.

For the full text, please, visit [osce.org](http://osce.org)

28/11/2008

Source: [OSCE.org](http://OSCE.org)