



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**



12068/04 (Presse 251)

PRESS RELEASE

2604th Council meeting

General Affairs and External Relations

External Relations

Brussels, 13 September 2004

President **Mr Bernard BOT**
Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands

* Some external relations items were adopted without debate at the 2603rd meeting on General Affairs (12067/04).

P R E S S

BELARUS - Council conclusions

The Council adopted the following conclusions:

" The Council has learned with great concern that the incumbent President of Belarus has called for a referendum to be held in parallel with the Parliamentary elections on 17 October 2004 to change the constitution of Belarus to allow a president to run without limitations in future presidential elections.

The Council recognises the right of Belarus to hold a referendum as a way to decide on its political and constitutional organisation but stresses the need to hold such a referendum in accordance with OSCE and Council of Europe standards and norms. The Council has serious and well-grounded doubts as to whether the necessary conditions for holding a free and fair referendum in Belarus are fulfilled. On the contrary, the state of democracy, rule of law and human rights in Belarus is deteriorating, as demonstrated *inter alia* by the recent closure of a number of independent newspapers and the continued oppression of the opposition.

The EU has repeatedly called on Belarussian authorities to establish a fair and constructive dialogue with the opposition before any referendum on changing the constitution could be conducted. The European Union has also underlined that there should be substantial changes to the electoral code of Belarus. Their successful implementation would be an important condition for guaranteeing a free and fair referendum. Furthermore, there should be a clear improvement in the situation of the media, in particular freedom of access to the media for all political groupings. Finally, a review of the role of Parliament should be considered, in order to give it real powers.

The Council once again reiterates its hope that Belarus will take its rightful place among European democratic countries. In this case, the EU would be able to further develop the relations between the EU and Belarus, including in the context of the European Neighbourhood Policy. If, however, the Parliamentary elections and the announced referendum do not take place under free and fair conditions, this cannot remain without its consequences for the relations.

Finally, the Council confirms its active engagement in the development of civil society and support of democratic forces in Belarus."