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Belarus – Flawed elections

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Mr President, Honourable Members,

Thank you for this opportunity to exchange views with you on the recent Presidential election in Belarus.

The events in Minsk confirmed Mr Lukashenko's determination to win this election come what may. Unfortunately, that was what we expected. However, what was less expected was the degree to which pluralistic forces were able to come together. This is highly a positive development and I congratulate them for it.

The OSCE/ODIHR initial report concludes that the election failed to meet OSCE standards for democratic elections. This was due to the arbitrary use of state power and widespread detentions; a disregard for the basic rights of freedom of assembly, association and expression; and problems with early voting, counting and tabulation processes.

The Commission therefore considers the election was fundamentally flawed.

We particularly deplore the refusal to admit registered OSCE and EU observers, including members of the European Parliament.

And we utterly condemn the violent suppression of protests and detention of peaceful protesters, including Mr Kozulin.

In line with the Council Conclusions of 24th March, we are now considering sanctions. It is important that sanctions be clearly focused, targeting precisely the individuals - including Mr. Lukashenko - responsible for the fraudulent elections. But we must avoid sanctions which harm the wider population, and we must make sure our position is widely understood. The Commission will be fully involved in the preparations.

For the future, we will continue our democratisation and civil society support. Commission assistance should not and will not stop. Indeed, we are currently finalising a proposal for our assistance strategy from 2007.

In line with the Council conclusions, democratisation support will continue through our different assistance tools.

We will also continue to support the "needs of the population" through social and economic development under our future European Neighbourhood Partnership Instrument instrument. We will combine contacts with middle-range officials to reduce Belarus' self-isolation with NGO cooperation and support which directly benefits the population such as health, the environment or in the Chernobyl-affected area.

The current EC-supported TV and radio programmes make an important contribution to democratisation. They also increase the EU's visibility in Belarus. It is important that we get across to the Belarusian population both the EU's considerable financial commitment and the potential benefits of ENP.

Throughout our assistance, we are keen to foster people-to-people contacts and we seek maximum flexibility within the limits of our financial rules.

First and foremost though, our concern is for the safety of all those detained in Belarus, and for those who seek to exercise their right to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly.

We must continue to apply pressure; demand the release of all those held for political reasons; and insist Belarus lives up to its international commitment as a member of the OSCE and the United Nations.

The violent suppression of peaceful protests and detention of political opponents and protesters have no part in democratic societies. We must hold firm, and show Belarus and its people that an alternative - a democratic, open future - is possible. The EU will support them all the way.