

P R E S S R E L E A S E

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**Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the European Union
on the sentencing of Messrs Statkevich and Shchukin**

The European Union deplores the suspended prison sentences imposed on 19 June on Mr Statkevich, Chairman of the Social Democratic Party, and Mr Shchukin. These sentences leave them at liberty, which the EU notes, but threaten to prevent them from participating in the forthcoming elections.

These sentences, which follow that imposed on Mr Chiguir, the former Prime Minister, and the administrative measures which prevented the Belarus Social Democratic Party from holding its annual conference under normal conditions, again demonstrate the reality of the obstacles which restrict the activities of political figures and parties belonging to the opposition.

Fair and democratic elections cannot be organised against such a background. The EU, the OSCE and the Council of Europe have jointly asserted the need, as one of 4 major conditions, for a period of "political truce" to allow elections to be planned, organised and held in acceptable conditions. Recently, President Lukashenko himself publicly voiced his support for such a proposal during a plenary meeting of the "national dialogue" initiated by the government.

For this reason the European Union urges the Belarus authorities, if they really want the parliamentary elections to be acceptable to the European institutions and the international community, to take – while there is still time – all the necessary measures to create the basic climate of confidence without which free and fair elections will be impossible, for example, by

- allowing recently sentenced political figures, in particular Messrs Chiguir and Statkevich, to participate in the forthcoming elections;

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- releasing those who are still detained;
- permitting the activity of opposition political parties and non-governmental organisations, free trade unions and the independent press, which still suffer too frequent harassment, particularly in the provinces;
- permitting the exercise of individual freedoms, civil liberties and trade union freedom;
- granting all parties, including opposition parties, the access to mass-circulation media that is commonplace in any democracy;
- allowing representatives of all the parties, including opposition parties, to participate in local, regional and national electoral commissions;
- opening a real dialogue between the government in power and the opposition parties, as recommended in the final declaration of the OSCE Summit in Istanbul.

Only if concrete and meaningful decisions were to be swiftly taken in these different areas could the EU, together with the other European institutions, the OSCE and the Council of Europe, decide to send observers to these elections.

The Central and Eastern European countries associated with the European Union, the associated countries Cyprus, Malta and Turkey, and the EFTA countries, members of the European Economic Area align themselves with this declaration.
