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**Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the European Union
on the Independence Day March, in Minsk on 25 March**

The EU deplors the unprovoked and disproportionate use of force by Belarusian authorities to suppress a march organised by the opposition in Minsk on 25 March, considering in particular the peaceful and orderly character of the last one held on 15 March.

The EU deeply regrets the random arrests made by the security forces on that day, involving Belarusian bystanders, march participants and journalists, as well as foreign observers, including a diplomat, an MP, and foreign press representatives.

The EU underlines that such events reflect a deterioration of the human rights situation in Belarus.

On these grounds, the EU calls on the Belarusian authorities to release without delay, and to drop charges against, any people arrested by security forces in connection with the march who might still be detained, including those who have already been sentenced.

At the same time, the Belarusian authorities are called upon to investigate thoroughly the mishandling of the march, notably reports that some people were detained before the march and that some detainees were subsequently beaten.

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In this context, the European Union calls on the Belarusian authorities to drop charges against Mr Lebedko, Mr Ivachekevich and Mr Belenki. The EU reminds Belarusian authorities of its previous similar requests regarding opposition representatives for their involvement in the Freedom March I in October 1999, such as Mr Statkevich and Mr Shchukin.

The EU calls on Belarusian authorities to lift the ban on all demonstrations. The ban represents an unjustified restriction of freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association of Belarusian citizens.

Such developments are a matter of grave concern and a setback to building a climate of trust in the framework of the dialogue process. The EU reminds the Belarusian authorities that human rights and the establishment of a real political dialogue are important elements of its benchmark policy towards Belarus.

The EU would also like to remind the Belarusian authorities that the Istanbul OSCE Declaration, signed by Belarus, emphasised that only a real political dialogue in Belarus can pave the way for free and democratic elections, through which the foundations for real democracy can be developed. The EU hopes that the Belarusian authorities will follow this path.

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