

Brussels, 25 April 2008

Commission increases support to Belarusian students studying abroad

Today, the Commission allocates €1 million to support the European Humanities University (EHU) in exile in Vilnius. The EHU is currently the only independent Belarusian University that allows Belarusian students to study without political interference. The allocation is financed under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and forms part of the Commission's continuing efforts to support Belarusian civil society and in particular Belarusian students and youth. This allocation will be paid into a designated Trust Fund for the EHU, which is being set up by the Nordic Council of Ministers. The Commission is the first donor to commit funds to the Trust Fund, which will be open for financial contributions from all international donors to the EHU.

The Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy, Benita Ferrero-Waldner said: "The establishment of the Trust Fund for the EHU by the Nordic Council of Ministers is an important step in guaranteeing that all Belarusian students, whatever their political views, have access to higher education. I am proud that the Commission will be the first contributor to this fund, and I urge other donors to also provide their support."

The situation with regards to human rights and democracy in Belarus still remains worrying.

(http://ec.europa.eu/commission_barroso/ferrero-waldner/speeches/index_en.htm)

Education is one of the most important areas in laying the foundations for democracy and the EC fully acknowledges the key role of the Belarusian youth in the democratization process in Belarus. From 2005-2007, the European Commission has supported the EHU and Belarusian students with €7.7 million - making it the largest donor to the EHU - mainly providing scholarships to study at the EHU or in Ukraine, but also helping the EHU to set up in Vilnius after having lost its teaching license in Belarus. Up to now more than 700 Belarusian students have been able to benefit from these funds.

In addition to giving support for studies at the EHU, the Commission also provides scholarships for Belarusian students within the framework of the Erasmus Mundus Programme since 2007. Under the Erasmus Mundus External Co-operation Window (EMECW), Belarusian students are able to study abroad in an EU university of their choice. So far, €6 million have been set aside for candidates from Belarus, Moldova and the Ukraine.

In order to ensure a transparent and consistent support to the EHU, the Nordic Council of Ministers is setting up a Trust Fund in 2008, which will pool the financial support of the Commission and other donors, including the bilateral contributions of EU Member States.

The Nordic Council of Ministers was formed in 1971 as a forum for Nordic governmental co-operation. It is composed of five countries (Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, Norway and Finland) and 3 autonomous territories: Faroe Islands, Åland and Greenland).

For more information on EU/Belarus relations please see:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/belarus/intro/index.htm