

Brussels, 16 October 2006

Commission launches scholarship programme for Belarusian students

Today, the Commission launches a €4.5 million programme to support scholarships for Belarusian students wanting to study abroad. Under this project, which will be implemented by the Nordic Council of Ministers, scholarships will be made available to Belarusian students from the start of this academic year. With the contribution of the Nordic Council of Ministers the programme totals €5 million. Scholarships will be granted to students who have been penalised by the regime and who have been denied access to Belarusian universities because of their political activities during and after the presidential elections of 19 March 2006. Thanks to these scholarships, Belarusian students who have been expelled will be able to pursue their studies in neighbouring countries in particular at the European Humanities University (EHU) in exile in Vilnius and in Ukraine. This initiative complements the scholarships offered by several Member States to sanctioned students. The project is part of the Commission's continuing efforts to support Belarusian civil society and in particular Belarusian students and youth.

The Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy, Benita Ferrero-Waldner said: *"Europe cares about the people of Belarus and wants to help those who have suffered because of their role in political activities normal in a democracy. I hope that those who study under this scheme will take home with them a greater understanding of life in a free society, and that they will maintain their hope and optimism that their country may one day enjoy these freedoms"*.

The situation with regards to human rights and democracy in Belarus remains very worrying and has recently further deteriorated. Since the presidential election of 19 March 2006, the Belarusian authorities have tightened their grip on civil society and in particular on the media, youth, opposition forces and NGOs.

Sanctions have targeted, amongst others, Belarusian students who demanded a fully democratic process at the time of the elections. As a retaliatory measure, a number of students have been expelled on political grounds or been refused the possibility to pass exams. It is expected that more students could be denied access to education in the coming academic year.

The Commission's 3-year scholarship programme for Belarusian students, worth €4.5 million will comprise of 3 components:

- Scholarships to 170 Master and 35 Bachelor Programmes for new students at the European Humanities University (EHU) in Vilnius. The new EHU admission may also include students who have not studied before but who have legitimate reasons to believe that their studies cannot be carried out in Belarus.
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- Living expenses for Belarusian students currently enrolled at the EHU

- Scholarships for 100 students for higher education in Ukraine and other neighbouring countries

The EHU, a Belarusian university which was forced into exile in Vilnius, is supported by the European Commission with €2.2 million. The EHU provides young Belarusians with education in social sciences or humanistic programmes. For those who seek to study other disciplines, Ukrainian universities are a suitable alternative, due to their proximity to Belarus.

Scholarships will cover tuition fees as well as living expenses (including social security and lodging). Students will be selected by a panel of experts under the authority of the Nordic Council of Ministers. Scholarships will be granted to students who have been accepted by a host university and who have demonstrated that they cannot study in Belarus.

The Nordic Council of Ministers was formed in 1971 as a forum for Nordic governmental co-operation. Five countries: Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, Norway and Finland and 3 autonomous territories: Ferroe Islands, Aland and Greenland participate.

For more information on EU/Belarus relations please see:

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

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