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Thomas Hammarberg
Commissioner for Human Rights
Council of Europe
F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex
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Dear Commissioner,

As a Commissioner for Civil Rights Protection, guarding civil and human rights and freedoms, I am more and more disquieted by the situation taking place in Belarus at the moment. Within recent days, we have witnessed uncommon, in the light of European standards, repressions affecting Poles living in this country.

According to the information reaching us through Polish media, Belarusian militia have arrested about forty activists of the Union of Poles in Belarus. As the press reports, these arrests are connected with the judicial proceedings that began on 15 February 2010 in Volozhyn. The proceedings regard the seizure of the Polish House in Iryanets during which the activists were removed from it. Militiamen acted on the motion of pro-government organization, also called the Union of Poles in Belarus, which claims its right to manage the assets of Polish Diaspora. The court is to adjudicate to which of the organizations the Polish House in Iryanets belongs. As a result of the arrests, three of the top activists: Andrzej Poczobut, president of the General Board of the Union of Poles in Belarus, Mieczysław Jaśkiewicz, vice-president of the Union of Poles in Belarus and Igor Banczer, the spokesman were sentenced up to five days of custody for participating in an illegal demonstration in front of the Polish House in Iryanets on 10 February 2010.

It should be noted that the events of the last few days are not the first alarming signals coming from Belarus. Even before that the press reported incidents of persecuting the journalists of independent mass media, for instance the satellite television channel "Bielsat", established in part by the Polish television.

Some commentators claim that such actions as those which have taken place recently are aimed at making it impossible for the Polish minority to consolidate itself before the local elections and during the presidential campaign which might be interpreted as an authorities' interference with basic democratic processes. It is extremely disturbing that the realization of fundamental and universal rights, which should be granted to each individual in a democratic society, is repeatedly hindered by acts of violence.

The ideas of freedom, pluralism and democratic state are a part of common European cultural heritage. It should be our duty to firmly protect these values. Considering the scope of your competences as a Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights as well as the your struggle against stigmatizing and marginalizing of minorities, demonstrated among others by standing against criminalization of immigrant offences within the European legal space, I have decided to ask you to undertake measures adequate to the situation, in particular to issue a statement referring to the above-described events in Belarus. Considering the desire of Belarus to accede to the Council of Europe, I have to assume that the measures of repression and intimidation directed towards national minorities may postpone its fulfillment.

*Yours sincerely,
Jens Holten*