

Press Release

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End the isolation of the Belarusian people, says PACE President, calling for a reinforced Council of Europe presence in Minsk

Strasbourg, 23.02.2006 – René van der Linden, the President of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE), today called for an end to the isolation of the Belarusian people and proposed the opening of a Council of Europe office in Minsk.

"We need to break the isolation of the Belarusian people. We must strengthen direct contacts with Belarusian democratic forces and civil society. We need to reinforce our presence in Belarus. Our Assembly has suggested establishing a Council of Europe Information Centre in the country. I think that this initiative is of fundamental importance to enable us to reach the people of Belarus," Mr van der Linden said in a [speech](#).

The President was in Prague addressing a conference on Belarus in the run-up to the presidential election, organised by PACE and the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He asked government representatives to give their political support to this initiative.

"I will make a specific proposal to the Russian authorities, as I believe that the support of the Russian chairmanship of the Council of Europe, from May 2006, would be decisive in putting this recommendation into effect."

Referring to the Presidential election of 19 March, Mr van der Linden said that it represented an important moment in the democratic development of Belarus.

"I want this election to be free and fair. Unfortunately, I fear that existing conditions will not allow for this," he said.

According to Mr van der Linden, the approach of this presidential election represents an important opportunity for the Council of Europe, other international organisations and countries from the region to take stock of their current policies and look forward, beyond the March vote.

"This is the moment to begin a process of critical reflection over the strategies that we have pursued so far for promoting democratic developments in Belarus as regards, on the one hand, relations with the Belarusian authorities and, on the other, support for civil society and democratic forces. This is the moment to think how we can improve international co-ordination in our policies towards Belarus," he concluded.

PACE President René van der Linden and Czech Foreign Minister Cyril Svoboda will adopt a [joint statement](#) at the end of the meeting.

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The Parliamentary Assembly brings together 315 members from the national parliaments of the 46 member states.

President: René van der Linden (Netherlands, EPP/CD); Secretary General of the Assembly: Matteo Sorinas.

Political Groups: SOC (Socialist Group); EPP/CD (Group of the European People's Party); ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe); EDG (European Democratic Group); UEL (Group of the Unified European Left).