

# Media Advisory

## Parliamentary Assembly – Communication Unit

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## Belarus: PACE rapporteur to propose restoring Special Guest status

Strasbourg, 18.02.2009 – The rapporteur on Belarus of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), Andrea Rigoni (Italy, ALDE), has said he will propose restoring Special Guest status to a delegation from the country's parliament – provided a mechanism can also be found to associate representatives of the extra-parliamentary opposition.

Göran Lindblad (Sweden, EPP/CD), the head of a PACE delegation which has just ended a four-day visit to the country, said: "The Assembly wants to bring Belarus closer to Council of Europe standards. Isolation has been tried and it has not worked. Mr Rigoni's proposal would allow the beginning of a structured dialogue, partly as a response to some positive developments in the country."

However he pointed out that any restoration of Special Guest status – if it was decided by the Assembly – should be temporary, and renewal will depend on Belarus making further progress towards democratisation. Contrary to an announcement by the Belarus state TV channel, there has been no decision to restore Special Guest status. There is only a proposal, which could be discussed by the Assembly as early as its June session, he added.

The three-member delegation also welcomed the release of all political prisoners, and expressed interest in the new Consultative Councils set up to allow a dialogue between civil society and the authorities. However, it remained concerned about freedom of association and assembly, and said that progress in developing media freedom – despite some limited positive steps – was essential.

It pointed out that Belarus was the only country in Europe where capital punishment still exists, and said the response of the authorities to instituting a moratorium on executions – as a first step to abolishing the death penalty – had been disappointing.

Finally, the delegation said it was keen to see the opening in the very near future of a Council of Europe InfoPoint in Minsk, which should be a starting-point for engaging with the Belarusian public at large.

### Information for editors

Special Guest status was created by PACE in the 1990s to help countries meet the conditions to become full members of the Council of Europe. It enables parliamentarians to take part in Assembly activities, but without the right to vote.

The Parliament of Belarus held Special Guest status from 1992 to 1997, but it was suspended in 1997 following the Constitutional referendum of November 1996. Shortly after, Belarus's application to join the Council of Europe was frozen, and it remains the only European country that is not a member of the Organisation.

### [Announcement of the PACE delegation's visit](#)

The Parliamentary Assembly brings together 318 members from the national parliaments of the 47 member states.

President: Lluís Maria de Puig (Spain, SOC) – Secretary General of the Assembly: Mateo Sorinas.

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