

# MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT MR. PAT COX

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I regret that I am unable to be with you today, to support your welcome efforts in promoting the 'Wider Europe' initiative and closer dialogue with our new neighbours. 2004 will be a decisive year for Europe. The enlargement on the 1<sup>st</sup> May, to a continent-wide Union of 25 members, will bring with it a new Eastern dimension, and extend the European Union to the borders of Belarus. Already at the European Council in Copenhagen, which concluded the accession negotiations under the banner of 'One Europe', the Union took cognizance of the concomitant need to develop a long-term approach to promoting democratic and economic reform in the

new neighbouring countries, including Belarus. In the near future, it will lead to the adoption of a new policy framework, now known as 'Wider Europe'. I and the European Parliament which I lead, fully endorse this development and support initiatives which deepen cooperative ties and contribute to cross border and mutually beneficial economic development. It has nevertheless been a source of sadness to me, during my mandate as President, that the authorities in Belarus have continued on the path of isolation, and have persisted in their violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression and of the media.

International conferences such as yours can help. Your deliberations can be a source of hope and, however indirectly, can contribute to the consolidation of democratic forces for change in Belarus. The development of practical cooperation projects, which I am sure you will call for – with Belaruaian civil society, democratic forces, NGOs, mass media, youth organisations and local authorities – have an important role to play in this regard. The Europe we are building is one based on shared values of pluralist democracy, freedom, justice and solidarity. Promoting and encouraging reform in our new neighbour Belarus can only lead to better understanding, greater prosperity and enhanced security and stability.

I remain hopeful. I hope that, in the words of the Belarusian poet Janka Kupala, in his powerful poem 'Young Belarus', one day soon Belrus will come forth and take the place among the community of nations that its people deserve. I commend to the participants from Belarus here today that they continue their peaceful endeavour to build a free and democratic society in their country. I wish you success for this conference.