



## EUROPEAN UNION

### OSCE Permanent Council No. 1301 Vienna, 4 February 2021

#### EU Statement on human rights violations in Belarus

Mr. Chair, the EU has been closely following the developments in Belarus and remains committed to a democratic, independent, sovereign and stable Belarus. Only last year we delivered twelve statements in the Permanent Council on the pre- and post-electoral developments in Belarus, repeatedly expressing our concerns over the deterioration of the human rights, democracy and rule of law, and condemning ongoing repressive actions against representatives of civil society, independent media and political opposition.

Regrettably, despite our constant calls, there has been no improvement of the situation in Belarus. According to Viasna Human Rights Centre, at least 750 people were detained for attending street events in December, with at least 481 people being sentenced to administrative arrests. From the beginning of the election campaign in May of last year, more than 33,000 people were arrested for participating in peaceful assemblies. There are 220 people considered political prisoners, and more than 900 individuals have been targeted by criminal cases. International human rights organisations and civil society have reported unprecedented and massive violations of human rights committed by the law enforcement officials, in particular multiple cases of torture and other types of ill-treatment. The Belarusian authorities have also directed repressions against students. By dismissing them from universities, the authorities not only deprived students of their basic freedoms of assembly and expression of opinion, but they are also effectively denied the right to education. In addition, the Belarusian regime is vigorously fighting the use of national symbols and cultural manifestations.

The repression has however not broken the determination of the Belarusian population, who, against all odds, fights for its democratic rights. We stand in solidarity with the courageous Belarusian people. We especially highlight the numerous female protesters and activists and welcome the indispensable role the women of Belarus play in the call for democracy and justice. We remain deeply concerned about the harsh sentences handed out over the past weeks against participants of anti-Lukashenko protests. Let me mention in this context only a few examples from last weeks: a resident of the Gomel region, Aleksandr Kulaga, was given two years in prison for allegedly uttering obscene insults against “a man named Lukashenko”. Vladimir Gorokh in Novogrudok was sentenced to seven years in prison for allegedly preparing anti-government protests. Two 18-year-old protesters, Safiya Malashevich and Tsikhan Klyukach, received two years and one and a half year prison terms respectively for hooliganism and insulting the president. Regrettably, the list of individuals sentenced on spurious charges expands continuously. We consider these disproportionate and politically motivated sentences as yet another attempt to intimidate and silence the Belarusian population. At the same time, the real perpetrators are still at large under the State’s protection. The impunity for human rights violations in Belarus must end. The EU again welcomes last year’s report on Belarus under the Moscow Mechanism and recalls its recommendations on the use of international legal mechanisms, as well as the use of national legal tools to investigate human rights violations in Belarus and bring perpetrators to justice.

Another reason for concern relates to the freedom of the media in Belarus. According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists, there were 477 detentions of journalists and media actors in 2020. Criminal proceedings have been initiated against 15 media actors and nine of them are currently held in custody. In this regard, the EU joins the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media in condemning the detention of the journalist Andrei Alyaksandrau for the alleged financing of protesters. The EU also stands in solidarity with the detained Belarusian blogger Ihar Losik, detained since June 25 for "preparing to disrupt public order", and Belsat journalists Katsyaryna Andreyeva and Darya Chultsova, imprisoned for broadcasting a violent dispersal during the protest in memory of Raman Bandarenka. We remain deeply concerned about the constant harassment

of journalists, including the Press Club Belarus, who are victims of intimidation, physical attacks or arbitrary arrests.

The EU urges the Belarusian authorities to reverse the current repressive policies and to end the ongoing crackdown on the pro-democracy movement, civil society and independent media. The EU reiterates its call on the Belarusian authorities to immediately release and rehabilitate all political prisoners, peaceful protesters, journalists, media actors and to put an end to politically motivated trials, including those against the members of the Coordination Council. We also call on Belarusian authorities to conduct a complete and transparent investigation into all allegations of human rights violations and to hold those responsible to account. Rule of law must be the guiding principle of any country that has subscribed to OSCE principles.

The EU hopes that this year our dialogue and interaction with Belarus in the OSCE, including within the Permanent Council, will be more fruitful and lead to concrete results. The recent appointment of new heads of institutions offers a unique opportunity in this respect. Our interest in the human rights of the Belarus people by no means represents outside interference in the country's internal matters. Human rights are universal and their protection concerns each and every person, state borders notwithstanding. Against this backdrop, the EU urges Belarus to deepen its co-operation with the OSCE and to make full use of the Moscow Mechanism report's recommendations and the expertise offered by ODIHR to help strengthen human rights and democratic institutions in Belarus. At the same time we again urge the Belarusian authorities to accept the offer made by the incumbent and previous OSCE Chairs, with the aim of facilitating a genuine dialogue process in Belarus.

The Candidate Countries REPUBLIC of NORTH MACEDONIA\*, MONTENEGRO\*, SERBIA\* and ALBANIA\*, and the EFTA countries ICELAND and LIECHTENSTEIN, members of the European Economic Area, as well as UKRAINE align themselves with this statement.

\* Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.