

Joint Statement on the Situation in Belarus

31st Meeting of the Ministerial Council

6 December 2024

I am delivering this statement on behalf of the following participating States, who are members of the informal Group of Friends of Democratic Belarus: Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czechia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The following participating States are also joining this statement:

Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Liechtenstein, San Marino, Slovakia and Switzerland.

Mr. Chair,

Over four years have passed since the fraudulent presidential election in Belarus in 2020. We strongly condemn the severe political repression and human rights violations that Belarusian authorities have perpetrated in its wake. Evidence of human rights violations have been documented by independent experts under the OSCE Moscow Mechanism in 2020 and 2023, as well as by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, various UN bodies, NGOs, including the International Accountability Platform for Belarus, human rights defenders, and journalists. According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, some of the violations may amount to crimes against humanity.

We deplore Belarus' involvement and complicity in Russia's unprovoked, unjustifiable and illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, which has been accompanied by further human rights violations, and contributed to regional and international instability.

We remain deeply concerned about the continuously deteriorating human rights situation in Belarus. The Belarusian authorities pursue their crackdown on human rights to stifle opposition and silence independent voices. Individuals attempting to exercise their human rights and fundamental freedoms continue to be subjected to intimidation, harassment, abuse and arbitrary detention, including acts of transnational repression while in exile. The civic space has been eradicated.

According to Viasna Human Rights Center, around 1.300 political prisoners are currently held in Belarusian prisons, with many incarcerated in appalling conditions and reportedly subjected to torture, or other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and without access to essential health services. At least seven of these individuals have died in detention. The UN Committee against Torture reported that torture in these prisons is systemic, habitual, widespread and deliberate with a pattern of impunity for perpetrators.

We remain deeply concerned that many prisoners are being held incommunicado, including: Viktor Babaryka, Aliaksandr Frantskevich, Uladzimir Kniha, Ihar Losik, Mikalai Statkevich, Siarhei Tsikhanouski and Maksim Znak. According to media reports, in November 2024, the father of jailed opposition activist, Maryia Kalesnikava, had been allowed to see her in prison, after more than 600 days of denied visits, calls and correspondence. No individual should ever face this kind of treatment. No family should endure such pain.

We reiterate that the Belarusian authorities must ensure that all persons deprived of their liberty are treated with humanity and respect for their inherent dignity. Belarusian authorities

have the responsibility to implement their OSCE commitments, including those under the 2020 Tirana Ministerial Council Decision on Prevention and Eradication of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

While we recognize the pardons that have been granted since July 2024, we emphasize that the Belarusian authorities continue to arbitrarily detain many more citizens on political grounds than they have pardoned. Thus, we reiterate our demand for the immediate and unconditional release of the approximately 1.300 political prisoners, as well as for their effective rehabilitation. We call again for the immediate release on humanitarian grounds of those with serious health issues or chronic conditions, people with disabilities, minors, older persons, people with children or single parents.

Moreover, we are closely following investigations into transfers of Ukrainian children to or through Belarus. We call upon the Belarusian authorities to ensure that no Ukrainian children are forcibly transferred to, or via, its territory.

Mr. Chair,

In 1990, in Copenhagen and Paris, OSCE participating states committed to democracy and political pluralism underlining that “the will of the people, freely and fairly expressed through periodic and genuine elections, is the basis of the authority and legitimacy of all government.” Participating States reaffirmed these commitments in Istanbul in 1999.

How can free and fair elections take place in such an environment in Belarus? Where there is no freedom of expression or media freedom? Where anyone who expresses a view counter to the authorities is branded “extremist”? Where individuals who attempt to exercise their right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association face a real threat of arrest and detention? In an environment with restrictions on political participation and de facto no form of political opposition allowed within the country?

In keeping with its OSCE commitments, Belarusian authorities must end these human rights violations and allow Belarusian citizens to participate in free and fair elections, with genuine choice and without fear of repression, starting with the presidential elections scheduled in January 2025. We further remind Belarusian authorities of the commitments made by participating States in Istanbul in 1999 to invite election observers from all other OSCE participating States, ODIHR, and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

Mr. Chair,

As agreed in the 1991 Moscow Document by all OSCE participating States, the commitments undertaken in the field of the human dimension are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned. The heads of state and government of all participating States reconfirmed this in 2010 in Astana.

We have raised our concerns multiple times in the OSCE Permanent Council over the past year, including by invoking the OSCE Vienna Mechanism in July 2024. Our concern for the fate of so many individuals is genuine. If the Belarusian delegation is also genuine when stating that it is open to dialogue and cooperation, it can demonstrate that by answering, in a meaningful way, the questions addressed by the invoking States of the Vienna Mechanism. But more action is required. We urge Belarus to follow up on the recommendations of the Moscow Mechanism experts, to immediately and unconditionally release all arbitrarily detained political prisoners, to implement all its OSCE commitments and to fulfill its

international legal obligations. Belarusian authorities must also stop providing support for Russia's illegal, unprovoked and unjustifiable war of aggression against Ukraine.

Thank you.