



## **EUROPEAN UNION**

### **OSCE Permanent Council No. 1314 Vienna, 20 May 2021**

#### **EU on recent developments in Belarus**

Mr. Chair, the situation in Belarus remains a matter of serious concern. The European Union strongly condemns the ongoing crackdown on journalists, media actors and media outlets, opposition leaders, human rights defenders, as well as other civil society actors in Belarus. This Tuesday, the Belarusian authorities have detained at least 15 workers of the independent online media outlet Tut.by, blocked the Tut.by website, raided its office and regional branches, as well as homes of several of its staff members, including the editor-in-chief Maryna Zolotova, deputy editor-in-chief Maxim Gaiko and journalist Elena Tolkacheva among others, and opened criminal cases against its leadership. We share the concern expressed by the Representative on Freedom of the Media Ms Teresa Ribeiro that these developments again underscore the extremely alarming situation regarding media freedom, access to information and safety of journalists in the country.

Last week, one of the leaders of Belarusian opposition, Ms. Maria Kalesnikava, who has been unlawfully detained since September, was ultimately charged with conspiring to seize power by unconstitutional means, facing up to 12 years in prison. We urge the Belarusian authorities to immediately release and rehabilitate all political prisoners, including members of the Presidium of the Coordination Council Ms. Maria Kalesnikava and Mr. Maxim Znak, journalists, media actors, and representatives of national minorities, and stop their harassment.

The EU remains alarmed about the situation of all those detained on political grounds, particularly in a view of reported allegations of torture, physical abuse, and intimidation. We consider the inhuman conditions deliberately created by the administration of

detention facilities as yet another attempt to intimidate Belarusian civil society. Such practices utterly contradict the core international obligations and commitments endorsed by Belarus, including in the OSCE.

Moreover, it is highly concerning that the proceedings in politically motivated criminal cases are increasingly marred by disrespect for the basic rights of the detained. The court irregularities, including the lack of transparency in judicial proceedings; confidentiality in contacts with lawyers, and public access to the court hearings as well as the growing pressure on lawyers violate the right to a fair and public trial, further eroding trust in the Belarusian judicial system.

We urge the Belarusian authorities to thoroughly investigate all accusations of torture, physical coercion, and intimidation, and ensure a fair and public trial of all subjected to criminal proceedings. In this regard, we call upon the Belarusian authorities to cooperate with the Office for Democratic Institution and Human Rights, which has offered its expertise to assist Belarus in increasing respect for human rights and strengthening democratic institutions, including by monitoring trials and reviewing legislation.

The EU reiterates its call on the Belarusian authorities to observe their OSCE and other international commitments related to the freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, and freedom of association. Against this backdrop, we regret that the law on “Countering Extremism” has been adopted without proper public consideration and will enter into force on 16 June. This law provides authorities with wide-range instruments to arbitrarily target and intimidate Belarusian civil society, having a devastating impact on civil rights in Belarus, by de facto banning the work of organised civil society actors.

We endorse the RFOM Ms Ribeiro’s assessment that the prosecution of independent media in Belarus, including Intex-press and Hrodna.life, on the pretext of countering extremism, dangerously curtails journalists’ reporting. We reiterate Ms Ribeiro’s call on the authorities to stop harassing journalists and release all those imprisoned, including Ms Lyubov Kasperovich, a journalist with Tut.by, Mr Alexander Burakov, a freelance reporter for Deutsche Welle, Mr Vladimir Laptsevich, a journalist with online news portal Mogilev Region and Ms Tatyana Kapitonova, a freelance photojournalist.

The civil society actors are indispensable components of every vibrant society, fostering our democracy and human rights. Instead of shrinking their space, the Belarusian authorities must end the overwhelming culture of violence, arbitrariness and impunity and strive to create a climate in which civil society and media outlets can carry out their legitimate work without fear of reprisals. The implementation of the recommendations of the OSCE's Moscow Mechanism report and support for the ongoing international efforts to collect and preserve documentation and evidence of serious human rights violations in Belarus would be a necessary step in this respect.

The EU remains convinced that an inclusive national dialogue leading to free and fair elections, with international observation including by ODIHR, remains crucial to addressing the situation in Belarus. In this regard, we again urge Belarusian authorities to take on the offer of the former and current Chairperson-in-Office, to facilitate a genuine and inclusive national dialogue.

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.