



EUROPEAN UNION

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EU Statement on the attacks on freedom of opinion and expression and media freedom in Belarus

The European Union strongly condemns the persistent attacks against freedom of opinion and expression, both online and offline, as well as media pluralism and independence in Belarus. The EU continues to strongly deplore the reported use of force, unlawful detentions of and fines imposed on journalists, bloggers and media actors reporting on public protests which followed the fraudulent 9 August Presidential elections in Belarus. We urge Belarus to fully implement all OSCE commitments and international obligations related to freedom of opinion and expression and media freedom, including on the safety of journalists.

We have raised this issue at the Permanent Council meeting of 3 September. Regrettably, since then, the situation of the freedom of opinion and expression and media freedom in Belarus has continued to further deteriorate. According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists, during the month of September, at least 60 journalists and media actors were illegally detained while conducting their professional activities. In addition, during the peaceful protests last Sunday (October 4), a further 16 journalists were detained, 5 of whom are still not freed. We consider these detentions as deliberately targeting journalists, given that those detained could be easily identified as media representatives.

Moreover, on 29 September, the Ministry of Information of Belarus took a decision to suspend the online media outlet "TUT.BY" from 1 October to 30 December, 2020. On 2 October, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus revoked – as of the same day – all accreditations issued to local and foreign

journalists, including those from EU Member States, working for international media outlets in Belarus. We condemn these steps as yet another attempt to silence journalists and to hinder the wider Belarusian society and the international community from getting independent reporting on the nation-wide protests, as well as on the abuses of peaceful protesters' rights by the Belarusian law enforcement bodies.

We continue to be concerned about the fact that access to the Internet in Belarus continues to be regularly blocked, that access to a large number of websites continues to be restricted, and the circulation of media reports continues to be disrupted.

As stated on many occasions by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, journalists play a crucial role in covering events of public interest, and authorities have to ensure that they are able to perform their work. In this context, we once again call on the Belarusian authorities to live up to their OSCE commitments and to stop all such attacks and restrictions. We urge them to immediately and unconditionally release all unlawfully detained journalists, bloggers and media actors, to restore all revoked accreditations, to repeal entry bans, to ensure access to the Internet and online media platforms, and to allow free circulation of the media. A thorough, transparent and impartial investigation of all attacks against journalists and media actors in Belarus must be conducted.

The EU will continue to follow the situation in Belarus closely and we will pay particular attention to actions that threaten any aspect of media freedom or the safety of journalists and other media actors.

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 and CANADA align themselves with this statement.

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