



## EUROPEAN UNION

### OSCE Permanent Council No. 1296 Vienna, 17 December 2020

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

Mr. Chair, last week on the occasion of Human Rights Day, the Permanent Council paid tribute to all human rights defenders, highlighting the crucial role of human rights, fundamental freedoms and democracy in achieving lasting peace and security. Nevertheless, this connection seems not to be commonly recognised within the OSCE, as grave systematic human rights violations continue to take place in the OSCE area. The post-electoral developments in Belarus remain particularly concerning in this respect.

The EU has been constantly bringing them to the attention of the Permanent Council. The immense courage of the Belarusian people who peacefully stand up for their democratic and human rights serves as an inspiration for us. It has shown that the fight for democracy and human rights is not an empty slogan but our ongoing commitment. The price which the Belarusian people have to pay for their democratic aspirations is high. Since the start of the protests, more than 30 000 peaceful protesters have been arbitrarily detained, more than 1 000 arbitrary criminal proceedings launched, and the number of political prisoners have reached new heights.

The recent decisions of the Belarusian courts add another sad chapter in this respect. On 7 December, Belarusian Natallia Hersche, who also holds Swiss citizenship, was found guilty of “violent resistance to a law enforcement officer” and sentenced to two and a half years in prison on spurious charges. Two other Belarusian citizens Maksim Paulyushchyk and Uladzislau Hulis were found guilty of hooliganism and sentenced to two-year prison terms each for writing “We Will Not Forget” on a sidewalk where peaceful protester Alyaksandr Taraykouski was killed by riot police. These are only two instances of the increasing numbers of Belarusians who in recent weeks have been charged under dubious articles of

the Criminal Code. The EU considers this practice as unjustified, disproportionate and aimed at creating pressure and fear among the Belarusian population. It is a sad paradox that the perpetrators of grave human right violations, despite our calls, enjoy full impunity while those who demand justice face heavy prison sentences. In this context, we reiterate our call on Belarusian authorities to take action to end impunity for human rights violations. Despite numerous complaints submitted to the relevant authorities, not a single criminal case has been opened against those responsible for human rights violations. This sends another dangerous signal of impunity to the security forces involved and is a carte blanche for them to continue their criminal behavior in the future.

At the same time, independent media outlets in Belarus which uncover the abuses of power are target of constant attacks. Revocation of the TUT.BY media status by the Economic Court of Minsk under the pretext of spreading “false information” is the latest example of the blatant crackdown on journalists and free media online and offline. It comes as no surprise that last week Reporters Without Borders classified Belarus as the most dangerous country in Europe for journalists. The numbers are overwhelming. Over 370 media actors have been arrested since 9 August, more than 62 journalists have been victims of violence, mistreatment or even torture while detained. Even now, at least six journalists are still in detention, three of them face criminal charges and prison sentences.

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 and media actors, as well as to put an end to politically motivated trials, including against 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.

The EU expresses its solidarity with the Belarusian people and remains committed to support the development of civil society in Belarus. Against this background, last week the European Commission adopted a 24 million Euro assistance package which will benefit directly the Belarusian people, in particular civil society,

independent media, students, as well as small and medium-sized enterprises. The EU stands ready to further support a democratic and peaceful transformation in the country with all the tools and instruments at our disposal.

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 finally accept the offer made by the current and incoming OSCE Chairs, with the aim of facilitating a genuine dialogue process in Belarus.

The EU reiterates its determination to take further restrictive measures as a response to the brutality of the authorities and in support of the democratic rights of the Belarusian people, in line with the agreement reached at the Foreign Affairs Council on 19 November 2020.

The Candidate Countries REPUBLIC of NORTH MACEDONIA\*, MONTENEGRO\*, SERBIA\* and ALBANIA\*, and the EFTA countries ICELAND, LIECHTENSTEIN and NORWAY, 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.