



## EUROPEAN UNION

### **OSCE Permanent Council No. 1319 Vienna, 10 June 2021**

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

The situation of almost 500 political prisoners in Belarus remains a matter of our grave concern. According to a number of credible reports from human rights organizations, prisoners are regularly subjected to torture and other forms of ill-treatment, including humiliation, intimidation, arbitrary surveillance techniques, beatings and forcibly obtained testimonies or confessions. Vitold Ashurak, a political prisoner, recently died in a correctional colony in Shklov in suspicious circumstances. 18 years old Dzmitry Stakhousky committed suicide because of the harsh interrogation process. Stsiapan Latypau, who spent 51 days in a so called pressure chamber tried to take his own life in the courtroom.

We strongly condemn all forms of torture and other ill-treatment by the Belarusian state authorities, which seems to reflect a deliberate decision by the authorities to create a climate of fear, with the aim of silencing critical voices. In this context, we recall that OSCE participating States have pledged the absolute prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment, and reaffirmed that no exceptional circumstances whatsoever may be invoked as justification of torture. Last year at the Ministerial Council in Tirana, OSCE participating States committed to abandon and refrain from the use of interrogation techniques that constitute torture and other ill-treatment, including to obtain a confession.

We are shocked by the recent broadcast footage with Raman Pratasevich and Sofia Sapega. We fully share the assessment of ODIHR Director Matteo Mecacci that it violates their right to a fair trial and may be a sign that they were coerced or tortured.

Any attempt to include the coerced “confessions” as evidence in court proceedings would further erode the legality and credibility of a trial.

We urge the Belarusian authorities to immediately release and rehabilitate all political prisoners, including Raman Pratasevich and Sofia Sapega, and stop repressions against them. We echo the ODIHR Director in his call on the Belarusian authorities to investigate credible allegations of torture or other prohibited treatment against political prisoners. Those involved in torture, physical coercion and intimidation must not enjoy impunity and must be held accountable without exception. International efforts to collect and preserve documentation and evidence of serious human rights violations in Belarus, such as the *International Accountability Platform for Belarus*, offer a significant contribution in this respect.

We remain alarmed about the continued systemic repression and intimidation of independent journalists, other media actors and media outlets in Belarus. According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists, 27 journalists are currently in jail, mainly apprehended for their reporting on public events and other political developments. Criminal charges have been brought against 15 journalists and employees of the largest and most popular independent media outlet TUT.BY, including its editor-in-chief Maryna Zolatava. We welcome the efforts of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Teresa Ribeiro and support her call on the authorities to put an end to the current climate of impunity regarding violence against journalists and to immediately and unconditionally release all journalists and media actors in Belarus.

The EU remains convinced that an inclusive national dialogue leading to free and fair elections, with international observation including by ODIHR remains crucial to address the situation in Belarus.

The EU reiterates its strong condemnation of the forced landing of a Ryanair aircraft travelling between EU capitals by the Belarusian authorities, followed by the detention of Raman Pratasevich and Sofia Sapega on 23 May. We welcome the decision of the International Civil Aviation Organization to investigate this unacceptable incident, which endangered aviation safety. In view of the further deterioration of the situation in Belarus, the EU decided on 4 June to strengthen the existing restrictive measures by introducing a ban on the overflight of EU airspace and on access to EU airports by Belarusian carriers of all kinds. At the same time, the EU reiterates its determination to adopt further sanctions, in line with the European Council conclusions of 24 May.

Once Belarus embarks on a democratic transition, the EU will activate the €3 billion package to help Belarus to stabilise its economy, reform its institutions to make them more democratic and help increase the economy's resilience, growth potential and job creation.

The EU expresses its dismay over the recent hindrance of passage of Lithuanian diplomatic couriers by the Belarusian officials at the Medininkai border crossing point, which constitutes a clear breach of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.

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 GEORGIA align themselves with this statement.

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