



EUROPEAN UNION

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EU statement on the recent developments in Belarus

After eight months of peaceful protests following the fraudulent August 2020 presidential election in Belarus, we are witnessing a further escalation of repression against the Belarusian people, including orchestrated campaigns of persecution of human rights defenders, journalists, media outlets and civil society representatives.

Last week, we saw a new wave of persecutions impact human rights activists in Belarus. Members of the civil society organizations Zviano and Human Constanta, including Enira Branitskaya, a human rights activist, were targeted in police raids. The Union of Poles in Belarus has become another target of the Belarusian authorities. Their offices throughout the country were searched at the end of March. Criminal charges have been brought against its leadership, including Andželika Borys, the newly re-elected Chairwoman of the Union of Poles in Belarus, and Andrzej Poczobut, a journalist and a member of the board.

Such repressive acts utterly contradict OSCE commitments and international human rights standards. The EU urges the Belarusian authorities to end the ongoing crackdown on representatives of civil society, persons belonging to national minorities, as well as independent media, and reiterate our urgent call to immediately and unconditionally release all political prisoners, including Andželika Borys and Andrzej Poczobut, and those arbitrarily detained.

The EU shares the concern expressed by the Director of the ODIHR, Mr. Matteo Mecacci, about reports of the violation of the right to a fair trial, including closed court proceedings, as well as the severe sentences handed down to peaceful demonstrators. We remain deeply concerned about the recent proposals to amend the law On the Bar and Lawyers aimed at strengthening the already excessive state control

over these institutions. The new legislation, if adopted, would prohibit both individual lawyers and law firms from defending people charged with criminal and administrative offences, further restricting the rights of citizens to legal assistance and representation. Moreover, the EU is deeply concerned about numerous legislative amendments approved by the Belarusian Parliament, including on Mass Media Law and Mass Gatherings Law. If adopted, these amendments will further undermine freedom of expression and the work of independent journalists and media actors in Belarus, especially when reporting on mass gatherings. The new legislation would also expand legal restrictions on mass media outlets and broaden the already extensive list of grounds authorities can use to deny them accreditation or shut them down. We call on Belarus to refrain from enacting these laws.

Instead of stifling independent voices, the Belarusian authorities should end the overwhelming culture of 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 necessary steps 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 address the situation in Belarus. The EU stands ready to support and calls on the Belarusian authorities to use every opportunity, including the expertise offered by the ODIHR, to help strengthen human rights and democratic institutions in Belarus. In this regard, we again urge Belarusian authorities to take on the offer, as presented by 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 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.