JOINT STATEMENT ON CONCERNS RELATED TO HUMAN DIMENSION COMMITMENTS IN BELARUS

As delivered by Ambassador Jocelyn Kinnear, Permanent Representative of Canada to the OSCE

Vienna, 8 February 2024

Madam Chair,

I am delivering this statement on behalf of the following participating States, who are members of the Informal Group of Friends of Democratic Belarus: Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United States, and my own country, Canada.

The following participating States are also joining this statement today: Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine.

In 1991, OSCE participating States "categorically and irrevocably" declared that the commitments undertaken in the human dimension are "matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned." (Moscow Document, 1991).

In this context, participating States have repeatedly found it necessary to raise Belarus' failure to meet its OSCE human dimension commitments, particularly since the fraudulent elections of 2020 and the significant decline in the human rights situation, which has followed. Belarus' complicity in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has aggravated the human rights violations and also contributed to regional and international instability.

For over three years, Belarusian authorities have engaged in a brutal crackdown on opposition figures, civil society representatives, journalists and media actors, religious communities and indeed almost all independent voices, which may amount to crimes against humanity, according to the UN Special Rapporteur on Belarus and the OHCHR. Individuals attempting to exercise their human rights and fundamental freedoms have been subject to intimidation, harassment, abuse and arbitrary detention.

This regrettable situation has been clearly documented in both the 2020 and 2023 Moscow Mechanism Reports, by the UN Special Rapporteur on Belarus and the OHCHR examination of the human rights situation in Belarus, as well as by the International Accountability Platform for

Belarus and Belarus' courageous human rights defenders. The OSCE Representative on the Freedom of the Media has spoken out repeatedly against repressive measures aimed at journalists and media actors.

In recent weeks, we have once again heard credible reports of Belarus' failure to meet its OSCE human dimension commitments. Last month saw yet another wave of harassment, arrests, and detention, this time targeting former political prisoners remaining in Belarus, the families of political prisoners, and those who have supported them. As Amnesty International has observed, "The severity is surprising even for a country and region that has witnessed more than its fair share of brutal reprisals."

Like the brutal post-election crackdowns in 2020, these actions appear to be aimed at intimidating the people of Belarus in the lead up to scheduled parliamentary elections this month.

Viasna Human Rights Center continues to report over 1400 current political prisoners, and that a staggering total of over 6300 people have been the victims of political repression through criminal and administrative convictions in 2023.

Many political prisoners face isolation, mistreatment, and lack of medical care, which has led to instances of death in detention, such as the recent appalling cases of Vadzim Khrasko, Vitold Ashurak, and Ales Pushkin. Individuals are sometimes held without any contact to the outside world nor do their families have any information about their whereabouts or condition.

We call for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners in Belarus.

Madam Chair,

Belarus' failure to uphold its human dimension commitments further extends to its clear disregard for its OSCE commitments in regard to democracy, and the Belarusian authorities' refusal to ensure that the people of Belarus can freely and fairly express their will in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

In 1990, in Copenhagen and Paris, OSCE participating states declared their commitment to democracy and political pluralism underlining that "the will of the people, freely and fairly expressed through periodic and genuine elections, is the basis of the authority and legitimacy of all government." Participating States reaffirmed these commitments in Istanbul in 1999, and further pledged to ensure fair competition among candidates and parties through media access and respect for the right of assembly.

It is evident that the authorities in Belarus have no intention to hold the genuine elections that are required under OSCE commitments. It is impossible so long as all forms of dissent or opposition are met with intimidation, harassment, persecution and imprisonment. In Belarus:

there is no freedom of expression; there is no freedom of association; and there is no free and independent media to share a plurality of ideas.

It is impossible that a genuine democratic election could be held in these deplorable circumstances.

The Lukashenko regime, of course, knows that this is the case. It is for this reason that Belarus has refused to invite election observers through the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA). In rejecting these observers, the regime seeks to avoid the transparency essential for holding genuinely democratic elections.

Let us also be clear: Belarus' refusal is inconsistent with the commitments made by participating States in Istanbul in 1999 to invite election observers from ODIHR, and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, and to follow up on ODIHR's election assessment and recommendations. We share the concerns that have been expressed by both ODIHR Director Mecacci and OSCE PA President Pia Kauma on this vital democratic issue.

Madam Chair,

So long as the regime in Belarus continues to fail to meet its OSCE human dimension commitments, and to violate the human rights and democratic freedoms of its people, we will continue to speak out and to raise our concerns.

Things can be different in Belarus. The people of Belarus deserve better.

We condemn the continued military support provided by Belarus for Russia's illegal, unprovoked and unjustifiable war of aggression against Ukraine. We call on Belarus not to provide further support for Russia's war of aggression.

We call on the Belarusian authorities to fully implement their international obligations and OSCE commitments, including by taking all necessary steps to create conditions for free, fair and genuinely democratic elections.

Thank you, Madam Chair.