

Freedom of media concerns in Belarus: UK-Canada joint statement

Mr. Chairperson. I make this statement also on behalf of Canada. Canada and the United Kingdom are extremely concerned by the treatment of journalists and independent media amidst the ongoing situation in Belarus.

There are numerous credible reports by media and civil society organisations of the excessive use of violence by Belarusian authorities against journalists, as well as peaceful protesters, the public, human rights defenders, political opponents and others since the Presidential election on 9th August.

As co-hosts of last year's Global Conference for Media Freedom, which Belarus attended – and as OSCE participating States – we wish to underline the commitments we – as OSCE participating States – made in Moscow in 1991 that independent media are essential to a free and open society and accountable systems of government and are of particular importance in safeguarding human rights and fundamental freedoms. Journalists in Belarus today are trying to play exactly that important role, for the benefit of the Belarusian people.

Though the strain faced by independent media has been made evident before, during, and after the Presidential elections, in the past week Belarusian authorities have made greater moves to hinder the free press. Over 70 independent news websites have been blocked. On the 27 and 28 August, approximately 50 journalists, including 4 from the BBC, were detained en masse for accreditation checks, despite the credentials of most being on clear display. Some foreign journalists were subsequently deported and banned from Belarus for five years, and four Belarusian journalists were charged with participation in a non-sanctioned event. On 1 September, six more Belarusian journalists were arrested and charged with the same offence.

On 29 August, 17 journalists, including two Belarusian resident correspondents for the BBC Russian Service and four from the Belarusian service of RFERL, had their accreditations revoked. The UK and Canada have raised our concerns directly with the Belarusian Foreign Ministry and we await their response.

Belarus must fully respect the OSCE commitments that we have all freely signed up to, including on media freedom and the working conditions for journalists. This includes the Ministerial Council Decision from 2018 in Milan on the Safety of Journalists. Belarusian authorities must provide space for a free press, stop targeting independent media and cease the suppression of journalists and media reporters.

We continue to support efforts by the OSCE Chair to establish an open and constructive dialogue, supporting the people of Belarus in defending their human rights and right to determine their future. We will continue to call for an independent investigation through the OSCE into the election fraud and

abuses of human rights during this period.

Mr Chair – Media freedom is essential to the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. We believe that people must be able to discuss and debate issues freely, to challenge those in power, and to make informed decisions. This is supported by access to information provided by a strong, robust and independent media.