

Moscow Mechanism report on Belarus: UK statement

Thank you Mr Chair for giving me the floor.

I would like to welcome Professor Wolfgang Benedek to the Permanent Council today and thank him for the meticulous and professional approach he has shown in preparing this report concerning human rights violations in Belarus.

I also welcome the opportunity to discuss this important issue with you today.

It is no secret that the UK was a vocal proponent of invoking the mechanism. We did so because of our profound concerns regarding the deeply flawed Presidential election in Belarus, and the grisly repression that followed. Professor Benedek's report shows all too clearly that our concerns were justified.

It is a comprehensive, well-substantiated and objective report. The evidence presented is stark and disturbing. The conclusions are clear. To quote Professor Benedek himself: "There is overwhelming evidence that the presidential elections of 9 August 2020 have been falsified and that massive and systematic human rights violations have been committed by the Belarusian security forces in response to peaceful protests and demonstrations."

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the brave individuals and civil society organisations who have made this report possible through their testimonies and submissions. They work tirelessly to defend human rights and to hold governments accountable for their actions. For this, we are grateful.

Mr Chair, Professor Benedek's report shows that every aspect of the election fell short of Belarus's international commitments. It confirms the widely held view that the elections were not transparent, free or fair. As my government has made clear, Lukashenko's claim to be President on the basis of the 9 August elections lacks legitimacy. The people of Belarus are entitled to free and fair elections and to decide on the future direction of their country.

The report finds that the allegations of human rights violations have been proven beyond doubt. The list is long and disturbing. Children separated from their mothers. Men and women, some as young as 15, beaten and subjected to physical and psychological torture. And all of this at the hands of Belarusian security forces. Alongside its partners, the UK has sanctioned some of those responsible.

As striking as the violations themselves are is the environment of impunity in which they were conducted. The evidence is there for all of us to see, on our TV screens, in our newspapers, across social media. Yet no one has been

held accountable for the well documented allegations of torture and cruel, degrading or inhumane treatment by the Belarusian authorities.

Mr Chair, This climate of impunity has helped perpetuate a cycle of violence against journalists and the media – a community which Professor Benedek's report shows has come under sustained attack. The Belarusian authorities have sought to hide their actions, by shutting down the internet, by arresting and harassing journalists, confiscating and breaking equipment and forcing media organisations into ever more complex methods of accreditation. The ability of journalists to work freely is fundamental to a functioning democracy. In the week that we mark the 7th international day to end impunity for crimes against journalists, I call on the Belarusian authorities to hold to account those who seek to harm journalists or restrict their ability to work.

Mr Chair, The appalling catalogue of violations evidenced in the report are not isolated incidents or events in the past. The Belarusian authorities continue to perpetrate a campaign of violence, coercion and intimidation against its own people. Reports state that over 16,000 people have been arrested or detained. Opposition figures remain imprisoned on false, politically motivated charges.

The Belarusian authorities have shown no intention of opening meaningful dialogue with Belarusian society. Instead they deploy ever more brutal actions against their people, using stun grenades and firing rubber bullets against the crowds. As recently as this weekend, Alexander Lukashenko threatened to leave protestors "without hands" should they touch a policeman.

Mr Chair, A solution must be found to this crisis. Crucially, it must be one which recognises and respects the democratic rights of the people of Belarus to determine their future and how they are governed. We are grateful therefore to Professor Benedek for his recommendations on how we can find a peaceful end to the current situation.

The report makes 82 recommendations of the Belarusian authorities, including new Presidential elections, an immediate end to the violence and release of all those illegally detained, an independent oversight mechanism on detention conditions, and an investigation into all allegations of torture.

The report also makes recommendations to the international community, including non-recognition of the election results, a request for fresh elections, granting asylum in cases of persecution and for an in-depth investigation of human rights violations. The UK supports these recommendations.

The Moscow Mechanism is a cooperative tool. It provides the basis for discussion and action, in the spirit of the OSCE as a forum for meaningful dialogue. The UK is disappointed therefore that the Belarusian authorities refused to engage constructively with the Rapporteur or allow him entry to the country. I urge the Belarusian authorities to reconsider their approach, and to take the opportunity Professor Benedek's report represents to work with the international community towards our shared goal of a democratic, prosperous Belarus.

Thank you, Mr Chair.