

Recent developments in Belarus: joint statement by Canada and UK

I make this statement also on behalf of Canada and it is intended to complement the statement by those who invoked, or supported, the Moscow Mechanism.

Madam Chair,

Earlier this week the Representative on Freedom of the Media and Chair in Office co-hosted the Stockholm Media Freedom conference. It was an opportunity for participating States to hear from expert voices across the media landscape, and to consider the importance of implementing our OSCE commitments to ensure media freedom across the OSCE region.

It was therefore with dismay that on 18 May, the opening day of the Stockholm conference, we heard of a further crackdown on Belarus' leading independent news portal, Tut.by. This organisation has operated for more than 20 years, providing independent reporting across Belarus. Tut.by has long faced persecution from the Belarusian authorities, for nothing more than reporting the facts on the ground.

An attempt last year to halt their work by removing their official status as a media organisation did not work. The charges brought against the organisation this week, the blocking of its website, and the search of its offices are a blatant attack on independent media in Belarus. The searches at the homes of Tut.by employees, the confiscation of equipment and the detention of employees is unacceptable.

These most recent events come just days after a number of journalists, including other employees of Tut.by, were detained and charged for nothing more than carrying out their jobs.

On 17 May, Tut.by journalist Lyobov Kasperovich, was sentenced to 15 days administrative detention, allegedly for taking part in an unauthorised mass event. Kasperovich was simply doing her job, reporting from the trial of a group of students.

On 15 May, two journalists in Mogilev, Alexander Burakov and Vladimir Laptsevich, were sentenced to 20 days administrative detention, again charged with participation in unauthorised mass events. These two journalists were detained while carrying out their legitimate work, reporting on the trial of opposition activists. On 14 May, photojournalist Tatyana Kapitonova was sentenced to 10 days administrative detention for laying flowers at a memorial.

These actions are a clear attempt by the Belarusian authorities to silence independent voices and stop media from reporting on these repressive measures. As noted by the OSCE's Representative on Freedom of the Media

(RFoM), in her statements of 17 and 18 May, these actions 'seriously jeopardise the fundamental human right to freedom of expression'. In expressing her alarm about the developments around Tut.by, the RFoM also called the blocking of their website "an extreme measure" which disproportionately interferes with media actors' activities. Madam Chair

Criminalising opposition voices and independent media in Belarus will not remove people's desire for greater democracy and freedom. We urge the Belarusian authorities to halt this campaign of oppression, release all those held on political grounds, and engage in meaningful and constructive dialogue.

We continue to support the offer of the current and previous OSCE Chairpersons-in-Office to facilitate a genuine national dialogue and urge the Belarusian authorities to take up this offer. Engaging in meaningful dialogue, which takes into account the views of the Belarusian people, is the only way to resolve the political crisis.