

Recent developments in Belarus: UK statement, 4 February 2021

Mr Chair,

It was almost six months ago to the day that the Belarusian people went to the polling stations to vote for their choice of President. But this election, like many others in Belarus, was neither free nor fair, nor did it meet international standards. Opposition candidates were arrested and their supporters detained; domestic and international independent observers, were unable to monitor, with the invitation to Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) issuing too late; votes were rigged and counts and results falsified.

ODIHR had reported the shortcomings of previous Belarusian parliamentary and presidential elections. But this time the people of Belarus demanded change. They wanted their votes to count. They wanted to participate. That is the essence of democracy and for which this organisation is here to develop, to support and to protect. They used the only means at their disposal, to go out on to the streets and demonstrate. When they did so, they did so peacefully and it has been a mark of the demonstrations ever since that they are peaceful and orderly.

The response from the Belarusian authorities over the past 6 months has been tough to witness – tens of thousands arbitrarily detained, with at least five fatalities; the offices of independent media organisations raided; journalists attacked and arrested; all leading opposition figures either exiled or imprisoned on trumped up charges; opposition signs banned; internet access regularly shut down and appalling reports of torture, cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment inside detention centres. All the while, the authorities have acted with impunity and without any attempt to investigate any of the allegations.

Mr Chair,

The UK has spoken out about the situation repeatedly. We will continue to do so. We have acted correctly, both with partners in invoking the OSCE's Moscow Mechanism and in holding those responsible for human rights violations to account through sanctions. The Belarusian authorities have complained that this is interference in their internal affairs. That is not the case. As an OSCE participating State, Belarus freely entered into commitments to uphold human rights and fundamental freedoms. It has failed to do so, and it is right that it is held to account for those failings. The UK will continue to act to uphold our shared commitments at the OSCE and in defence of the Rules Based International System, which exists to protect us all.

Throughout the last six months, the Belarusian government has ignored calls from its own people and the international community to engage in peaceful and inclusive national dialogue to help resolve the situation. Belarusians are

calling for their democratic rights to be respected through new elections, which are free and fair. It is difficult to see how there can be any substantive proposals towards a democratic solution when there are now over 200 political prisoners in jail and key opponents exiled from their country.

Mr Chair,

The UK stands in solidarity with those calling for democratic change in Belarus. I use this opportunity today, to remind the Belarusian authorities that there is a roadmap out of the crisis – release those arbitrarily detained, release all those held on political grounds, allow those in exile to return, stop attacking independent media, properly investigate the allegations of abuse including torture, and engage with OSCE partners in implementing the recommendations in Professor Benedek's report in full.