

UK Statement on human rights in Belarus

Mr Chairman,

Thank you for calling this meeting to discuss the alarming developments in Belarus. The UK welcomes this opportunity to hear from the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus and from representatives of Belarusian civil society.

It is no secret that the UK has been shocked by the events we have seen unfold in Belarus. Our statements have been unequivocal. We do not accept the result of the Presidential election of 9 August, and share the concerns raised by the UN including by the Secretary-General, two Working Groups and four Special Rapporteurs – including Ms Marin who is of course with us this morning.

I will not list in detail the violations we have seen take place in Belarus; the speakers have shared their own experiences of these. But I will reiterate that the UK will not sit back silently when we see political candidates and their campaign teams, peaceful protestors or journalists subject to harassment and detention by the authorities on unclear grounds. When democratic values are ignored, electoral processes manipulated and independent observers excluded. When violence is used against citizens, journalists including representatives of the BBC and other international outlets, and others – including, appallingly, minors.

The Belarusian authorities must cease brutalising protesters, release political prisoners including members of the Coordination Council, and engage in constructive dialogue with the Council and wider civil society. The international community demands that the rights of the Belarusian people be respected, and that those who have violated them be held accountable. An independent investigation through the OSCE into the electoral process and the violations that followed will be a critical step towards ensuring this accountability, as I made clear in my statement at the Special Permanent Council on 28 August. We are also prepared to use sanctions to hold those responsible to account, and we will be working with partners to explore all options.

There are some who have intimated that geopolitics is playing a role in the concerns we are raising, or that third parties are intervening in Belarus' internal affairs to fuel demonstrations. Such claims are wholly false. All we are asking is for the Belarusian state to live up to the obligations it has to protect the rights of its own people.

The UK has long worked in partnership with others to support civil society in Belarus. I am proud to be able to say today that the UK intends to double its support for independent media, human rights organisations and community groups in Belarus with an extra £1.5m for projects over the next two years.

I would like to conclude by thanking those who have briefed us today on their experiences. The expertise of Ms Marin and the contributions of Ms Tsikhanovskaya, Mr Stefanovic and Ms Siakhovich have been invaluable. Your bravery and determination to seek a more open, democratic future for the people of Belarus is highly commendable.

Thank you.