



**PERMANENT REPRESENTATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA
TO THE UN, OSCE AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**

JOINT STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF 38 OSCE STATES TO INVOKE THE VIENNA HUMAN DIMENSION MECHANISM ON POLITICAL PRISONERS IN BELARUS

As delivered by Ambassador Mrs. Barbara ŽVOKELJ, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Slovenia to the UN, OSCE and other International Organizations in Vienna, to the 1482th Permanent Council, Vienna, July 11th 2024.

I am delivering this statement on behalf of the following participating States, who are members of the informal Group of Friends of Democratic Belarus: Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czechia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United States, and my own country, Slovenia.

The following participating States are also joining this statement: Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Liechtenstein, Moldova, North Macedonia, Slovakia, Switzerland and Ukraine.

In the 1991 Moscow Document, OSCE participating States declared that commitments undertaken in the field of the human dimension are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned.

In keeping with this commitment, we wish to express our deep concern regarding the severe human rights violations and abuses occurring in Belarus. These were documented by rapporteur Professor Hervé Ascensio after 38 participating States invoked the Moscow Mechanism on 23 March 2023. His report, introduced to the Permanent Council on 11 May 2023, described repression designed to hinder any form of opposition, which led to waves of arrests on political grounds, targeting demonstrators, journalists, other media workers, human rights defenders, representatives of trade unions, lawyers, political opponents, and those expressing their opposition to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, among others. The report recommended the release of all political prisoners and the reform of existing laws in Belarus to bring national criminal legislation and the code of administrative offences in full compliance with international norms and standards.

Regrettably, Belarus has followed neither these recommendations nor a similar call for the release of all the political prisoners issued by 17 UN experts. Other reports from various UN bodies and NGOs have confirmed that the human rights situation in Belarus, in particular the situation of political prisoners, has continued to deteriorate.

To date, six of these individuals have died in detention: Vitold Ashurak, Mikhaïl Klimovich, Ales Pushkin, Vadzim Khrasko, Ihar Lednik and Aliaksandr Kulinich. Many others are being held incommunicado.

Experts have documented that the estimated 1400 political prisoners currently in detention in Belarus experience torture, inhuman or degrading treatment, acts of physical or sexual violence, lack of basic medical care and privacy, lack of a fair trial, psychological pressure and discrimination, with their cells and clothing marked with yellow tags.

While we take note of the recent release of several political prisoners, we consider unsatisfactory the Belarusian authorities' response to the Moscow Mechanism report of 11 May 2023 and, given our ongoing concerns about developments over the past 12 months, our countries are now invoking the Vienna (Human Dimension) Mechanism, along with the requirements of Belarus under that Mechanism.

The full text of the letter of invocation, including the names of several persons whose situation is particularly critical, will be circulated to all participating States. But I would like to read the questions it contains.

Since the release of the Moscow Mechanism report on Belarus, on 11 May 2023:

1. What steps have Belarusian authorities taken to ensure that persons deprived of liberty on politically motivated grounds are treated with humanity and respect for their inherent dignity?
2. What steps have Belarusian authorities taken to release political prisoners on humanitarian grounds, including those with serious health issues or chronic conditions, people with disabilities, minors, older persons, people with children or single parents? What update can be provided on the prisoners mentioned in the letter?
3. What steps have Belarusian authorities taken to ensure that specific needs of female detainees, including psychological and medical needs, are taken into account?
4. What steps have been taken to ensure that all detainees have access to necessary and appropriate medication and medical care?

5. What steps have been taken to ensure decent conditions of detention for all prisoners? Do authorities in charge of detention facilities provide all prisoners, without exception, with blankets, mattresses, and sanitary articles? Which measures have been taken against overcrowding?
6. In the light of documented cases of ill-treatment which may in some instances amount to torture, including sleep deprivation, what steps have Belarusian authorities taken to investigate all allegations and to prevent such treatment in the future?
7. What criteria govern the use of solitary confinement, punishment cells (SHIZO) and cell-like premises (PKT)? As these have been identified as potentially inhumane conditions of detention, what steps have been taken to reduce their use?
8. What steps have been taken to ensure that every prisoner has access to legal counsel of their own choosing, to effective remedies and a fair trial? What steps have been taken to ensure that prisoners are able to maintain contact with family members?
9. Will Belarusian authorities refrain from implementing the procedure of deprivation of citizenship of Belarusian nationals living abroad as a sanction for so called “participation in extremist activity or infliction of grievous harm to the interests of the Republic of Belarus”?
10. Will Belarus end repressive measures taken against family members in order to exert pressure on defendants and political prisoners?
11. As a measure of transparency, would Belarus allow visits to detention facilities by representatives of international organizations, including the ICRC, and foreign States in detention facilities?

We expect to receive information in response to these serious concerns in writing within ten days, in accordance with the Vienna (Human Dimension) Mechanism.

I request this statement and the corresponding invocation letter be attached to the journal of the day.