



Delegation of Canada
to the OSCE

Délégation du Canada
auprès de l'OSCE

**STATEMENT BY AMBASSADOR JOCELYN KINNEAR
ON THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF SOLIDARITY WITH BELARUS (November 12th)
1451st MEETING OF THE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

16 November 2023

Madam Chair,

I am delivering this statement on behalf of Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and my own country, Canada.

I would thank the EU for adding this item to the agenda today in recognition of the International Day of Solidarity with Belarus. We stand in solidarity with the people of Belarus and their hopes for a free and democratic future.

More than three years have passed since the flawed and fraudulent 2020 presidential election, and regrettably, the aspirations of the people of Belarus, expressed during that election and in the peaceful protests which followed, remain unfulfilled.

A desire for democratic change has been met by repression and the persecution of political opponents and dissidents. Belarusian authorities have relentlessly targeted their own citizens, systematically liquidating civil society organizations and clamping down on independent journalists, trade unions, human rights defenders and many other people. Almost all independent media has been suppressed, and editors and journalists have been among those targeted for arbitrary arrest.

The number of political prisoners has remained shockingly high with just under 1,500 individuals currently held in detention for exercising their freedom of expression, opinion and association. Many of those in detention face isolation, mistreatment and lack of medical care. This includes Ales Bialiatski, chair of Viasna Human Rights Center and winner of the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize, who is serving a 10-year sentence and was recently placed in a punishment cell and denied access to his lawyer.

As both the 2023 and 2020 Moscow Mechanism reports have documented, there is compelling evidence of widespread, continued human rights violations against all parts of Belarusian society. Adopted legislation has restricted political rights, limited freedoms of assembly, association, and expression, and extended the application of the death penalty. As Professor Ascencio, the rapporteur of the 2023 Moscow Mechanism report, aptly summarized: “The Belarusian government now has a full arsenal of legislation designed to hinder any form of opposition.”

The years since 2020 have also seen a rapprochement between Belarus and Russia which culminated in Russia using the territory of Belarus as a launching point for its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Belarus' complicity in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine continues, and has been accompanied by the repression of those expressing their opposition to the war or their support for the Ukrainian people.

None of these policy decisions seems to take into account the wishes or interests of the people of Belarus. The people of Belarus deserve their own independent, democratic nation, free of interference from and subservience to Russia.

Madam Chair,

Parliamentary elections are scheduled to be held in Belarus on 25 February 2024. The next Presidential election will take place in 2025.

We call for free and fair elections in Belarus, to be conducted without interference, intimidation and fear of persecution, in full conformity with international standards. Freedom of expression and association must be respected, including for independent media and for political parties. All potential candidates should be able to run for office without fear of arrest or reprisal. International observers should be invited. Civil society should be allowed to play its role of holding governments and political figures accountable.

We call for the immediate the release of all political prisoners, for an end to human rights violations, and for a dialogue that respects the will and the human rights of the Belarusian people.

We stand in firm solidarity with the people of Belarus, and we will continue to call for Belarus to fulfill its OSCE commitments and respect its international obligations, including protecting the human rights and democratic freedoms of its people.

Thank you, Madam Chair.