



EUROPEAN UNION

OSCE Permanent Council No. 1279 Vienna, 3 September 2020

EU Statement on the attacks on freedom of opinion and expression and media freedom in Belarus

The EU strongly condemns the persistent attacks against freedom of opinion and expression, both online and offline, as well as media pluralism and independence in Belarus. The EU strongly deplores the reported use of force, unlawful detentions of and fines imposed on journalists, bloggers and media actors reporting on public protests in the run-up to the 9 August Presidential elections and their aftermath in Belarus. As stated on many occasions by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, journalists play a crucial role in covering events of public interest and authorities have to ensure that they are able to perform their work.

On 14-15 July, at least 17 journalists were reportedly detained, when covering mass public protests against the Central Electoral Commission's decision to deny the potential opposition candidates Valery Tsapkala and Viktor Babaryka the opportunity to register and to take part in the 9 August Presidential elections. On the Election Day, another 19 journalists were detained. According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists, at least 141 journalists and media actors have been unlawfully detained since then, and at least 7 new cases of detained journalists and media actors were detained on 1 September. Many journalists and media actors have suffered physical injuries, faced ill-treatment at the detention centres and had their assets, as well as identity documents, deliberately destroyed or confiscated by Belarusian law enforcement officers, despite the fact they could be easily identified as media representatives.

We deplore the fact that at least 17 local and foreign journalists, representing largest international media outlets, have had their accreditations revoked on 29 August. It is also deeply concerning that Belarusian authorities have detained and then deported foreign journalists, including from EU Member States.

We urge the Belarusian authorities to immediately stop such attacks and to immediately and unconditionally release all unlawfully detained journalists and media workers. We also urge the Belarusian authorities to restore any revoked accreditations, to repeal entry bans and to ensure access to the Internet and online media platforms. A thorough, transparent and impartial investigation of all the attacks against journalists and media workers in Belarus must be conducted.

We are also deeply concerned about the fact that access to Internet in Belarus has been regularly blocked, that access to a large number of websites has been restricted, and the circulation of media has been disrupted. We call on the Belarusian authorities to live up to their OSCE commitments and to stop such restrictions.

The EU remains concerned about the overall safety of journalists in Belarus. We are also worried about the situation regarding media freedom and freedom of opinion and expression, both online and offline. We urge Belarus to fully implement all OSCE commitments and international obligations related to freedom of opinion and expression and media freedom, including on the safety of journalists.

The EU will continue to follow the situation in Belarus closely and we will pay particular attention to actions that threaten any aspects of media freedom or the safety of journalists and other media actors.

The Candidate Countries REPUBLIC of NORTH MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO*, SERBIA* and ALBANIA* and the EFTA countries ICELAND and LIECHTENSTEIN, members of the European Economic Area, as well as UKRAINE and ANDORRA align themselves with this statement.

* Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.