



EUROPEAN UNION

OSCE Permanent Council No. 1411 Vienna, 16 February 2023

EU Statement on the political prisoners in Belarus

1. Mr. Chair, almost every day there are new examples in Belarus of arbitrary and cruel sentences in political trials held behind closed doors. The repression by the Lukashenka regime continues unabated, with currently over 1,440 political prisoners.
2. The persecution of persons belonging to national minorities, including Poles living in Belarus, is unacceptable. Last week, a court in Grodno pronounced another politically motivated verdict: a Belarusian-Polish journalist and member of the board of the independent Union of Poles in Belarus, Andrzej Poczobut, was sentenced to eight years in a penal colony on trumped-up charges of “incitement to hatred”. This disgraceful verdict is directed not only against this courageous journalist, but represents yet another act in the anti-Polish campaign of the Belarusian authorities.
3. The ongoing trial against members of the Human Rights Center Viasna is another alarming step in the violent campaign against civil society, democratic activists and human rights defenders. The prosecution is seeking to sentence the Viasna Chair and 2022 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Ales Bialiatski, to 12 years in a penal colony; his deputy, Valiantsin Stefanovic, to 11 years; the lawyer and coordinator of the “Free Elections Campaign”, Uladzimir Labkovich, to 9 years; and Zmitser Salauyou, tried in absentia, to 10 years. The politically motivated charges against them, including “money laundering” and “financing of group actions grossly violating public order”, refer to Viasna’s legitimate human rights activities.

4. The EU strongly condemns the brutal repression aimed at silencing any independent voices and closing all space for democratic debate. The persecution of civil society, democratic activists and human rights defenders in Belarus must stop. We will continue to support all the people striving for a free, democratic and independent Belarus.
5. The EU reiterates its call on Minsk to immediately and unconditionally release and rehabilitate all those unlawfully detained, including Andrzej Poczobut and all Viasna members, to stop violating human rights and fundamental freedoms of the Belarusian people, to engage in a genuine and inclusive dialogue with the democratic forces, and to enable a peaceful political transition to a democratic society.

The Candidate Countries NORTH MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO*, ALBANIA*, UKRAINE, the REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA, and BOSNIA and HERZEGOVINA*, and the EFTA countries ICELAND, LIECHTENSTEIN and NORWAY, members of the European Economic Area, align themselves with this statement.

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