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STATEMENT ON THE BELARUS ELECTIONS AND THE DETERIORATING HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN THE COUNTRY

As delivered by Ambassador Anne-Kirsti Karlsen at the 1463rd Permanent Council,
on behalf of the Informal Group of Friends of Democratic Belarus
Vienna, 29 February 2024

Thank you, Madam Chair.

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, Canada, Czechia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United States, and my own country, Norway.

The following participating States are also joining this statement: Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Slovakia, Switzerland and Ukraine.

Since the fraudulent presidential election of 2020, Belarusian authorities have engaged in a brutal crackdown on opposition figures, human rights defenders, civil society activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens who dare voice any opposition or dissent. The ongoing repression and restrictions on political participation, including legislative and constitutional reforms that severely curtail the freedom of expression, assembly, and association, have only increased in the leadup to the parliamentary and local elections held last Sunday, February 25. It is clear that the conditions for free, fair, and genuine elections have not been met, and Belarus continues to show utter disregard for OSCE principles and commitments.

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We regret that Belarusian authorities failed to invite election observers from the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. ODIHR rightly noted that Belarus' decision was contrary to its commitments and, quote, "went against both the letter and the spirit of collaboration on which the OSCE is based." End quote. Further, we join ODIHR in reminding Belarusian authorities of their international obligations and OSCE commitments to respect human rights and the rule of law, and to ensure accountability for human rights violations.

Madam Chair, we also commend the work of courageous Belarusian human rights defenders and civil society organizations who continue to advocate for the Belarusians' rights and freedoms despite the risk. Organizations such as the Belarusian Helsinki Committee and the Viasna Human Rights Center continue to advance democratic reform and promote the human rights of Belarusians at home and in exile through initiatives such as the "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" campaign. We join them in calling for the unconditional release of the approximately 1,400 political prisoners held by Belarusian authorities. As the 2023 Moscow Mechanism report detailed, many of these political prisoners are subject to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment, face isolation, and are often denied necessary medical care. Tragically, five political prisoners have died in Belarusian correctional institutions since May 2021.

Finally, Madam Chair, we pledge to continue to stand with the people of Belarus in support of their aspirations for a democratic future for as long as it takes. We will not stay silent on the abuses perpetrated by Belarusian authorities nor will we stop advocating for the protection of human rights in Belarus. The bravery and resilience of the Belarusian people to call for a democratic society that respects their rights and freedoms inspires us all.

Thank you, Madam Chair.