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**STATEMENT BY MR. ALEXANDER LUKASHEVICH,
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AT THE 1278th (SPECIAL) MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

28 August 2020

On the situation in the Republic of Belarus

Mr. Chairperson-in-Office,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

We take note, Your Excellency Mr. Rama, of your position. One of the Organization's tasks is of course to assist participating States in fulfilling their OSCE commitments. Such assistance must be rendered in co-operation with, and at the request of, the receiving State on a constructive, depoliticized basis and with respect for the principle of national sovereignty. This is something we can presently discuss. One may legitimately ask, though, whether the true purpose of today's deliberations is to provide an ex-post-facto underpinning for the offer already announced by the current OSCE Chairmanship and the incoming Swedish Chairmanship to help facilitate a dialogue in Belarus.

The OSCE rules, notably the relevant decisions of the CSCE Summit held in Helsinki in 1992 and of the Ministerial Council meeting held in Porto in 2002, leave no room for arbitrary interpretation of the Chairmanship's mandate: initiatives of this kind require the prior agreement of the participating States.

Besides, why was a similar meeting not held in connection with, say, the ongoing mass protests and violence in the United States of America? After all, the extent and tragic consequences of the latter are on a completely different dimension from what is going on in Belarus. Similar meetings could also have been held regarding certain European Union countries. The complicated situation in these countries has deliberately been hushed up, with the OSCE's human rights bodies making only mild criticisms, if at all.

In any case, it is with profound empathy that we in Russia are following the developments in our brother nation Belarus. We are in no doubt that the wisdom of that country's people will make it possible to overcome the current difficulties in the interests of the whole of Belarusian society. We sincerely wish that Belarusians may see the situation in their country normalize as soon as possible. There is no question that we stand ready to – and will – render all the assistance we can to our strategic ally, taking into account our obligations within the framework of the Union State and under the Collective Security Treaty Organization, if such a need should arise. This was clearly stated by the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, in an interview with the television channel Rossiya on 27 August.

Belarus is going through a most complicated period. A presidential election was held there on 9 August. This opportunity for the people to express its will was organized in full accordance with the existing Constitution and electoral laws. The Central Election Commission of the Republic of Belarus declared the incumbent President, Alexander Lukashenko, to be the victor. Certain opposition figures refused to recognize that outcome. The quarrelling over the election results spilled over into the country's streets.

Of course, it is by no means all members of the opposition who are trying to dispute the choice made by the Belarusian people. There is no unity among those who oppose the country's existing authorities. The so-called "Coordination Council of the Opposition" represents the interests of just one group. A few days ago, the Constitutional Court of Belarus declared that the activities of the "Coordination Council" contravened the country's Constitution.

The OSCE failed to make use of its opportunity to help the Belarusian authorities and the opposition to iron out their mutual grievances in the run-up to the presidential election – grievances that kept growing as election day drew closer. Indeed, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) chose to walk away from the fulfilment of its mandate regarding the monitoring of elections. The Belarusian Government's willingness, confirmed on several occasions, to host international observers and the official invitation it sent out to that effect were simply ignored over at the ODIHR. Moreover, the ODIHR made an absurd attempt to shift the blame for this on to the Belarusian authorities, claiming that the invitation had come "too late".

We would remind you that paragraph 8 of the CSCE Copenhagen Document (1990) states that the foreign observers invited by a participating State "will undertake not to interfere in the electoral proceedings", while the sole obligation of the participating State, as laid down there, is "inviting" foreign observers "to observe the course of [its] national election proceedings". This is an obligation that was indeed honoured by Belarus, with such invitations being issued notably to the OSCE, the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

The arbitrariness of the ODIHR merits a separate discussion. There is a long overdue need for uniform, consensus-based criteria to be developed in this field, as proposed by Russia and several other participating States on a number of occasions. The celebrated "gold standard" of election monitoring by the ODIHR has essentially become a tool for exerting pressure.

Fanning the flames of confrontation, the ODIHR took the liberty, after the presidential election, of declaring that violations of the election process had taken place in Belarus and accusing the country's law enforcement agencies of violence against demonstrators – all on the basis of some unverified "reports" from dubious sources. We consider such irresponsible and politically biased declarations by the ODIHR to be unacceptable, all the more so since the ODIHR is currently without a Director. This kind of behaviour undermines the trust placed not only in that OSCE executive structure but also in the Organization as a whole.

The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union hastened to confirm the patently groundless conclusions about the election in Belarus having been "neither free nor fair". It is difficult to understand what these allegations could possibly be founded on, given that the ODIHR refused to conduct an election observation mission. All the same, though, the starting shot has been fired for a race to draw up sanctions against Belarusians, while decisions have been taken to provide financial support to oppositional media. The consequences of these rash steps, which border on attempts at external interference in the affairs of a sovereign State, are simply left out of the equation.

Rushing ahead of the European “grandees”, the European Union Member States that share frontiers with Belarus are openly calling for a change of power in Minsk, mentoring the co-ordinators of protests and those who seek to stir up violence, and helping to raise money for strike participants in the hope of undermining economic stability in Belarus. In short, they stop at no means to intensify the confrontation within the country and to prevent a settlement from being reached.

Over the past few weeks, Russia has been in intensive contact with other countries on the situation in Belarus. It goes without saying that we are constantly in touch with the Belarusian Government. President Putin has held telephone conversations with the Federal Chancellor of Germany, Ms. Angela Merkel; the President of France, Mr. Emmanuel Macron; the President of the European Council, Mr. Charles Michel; the President of Finland, Mr. Sauli Niinistö; and the Prime Minister of Italy, Mr. Giuseppe Conte. The Russian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Sergey Lavrov, has discussed this matter with you, esteemed Chairperson-in-Office, and with his counterparts from the European Commission, Germany, Sweden and the United States. As they have said, there is on the whole no interest in creating an artificial crisis out of the situation in Belarus.

We are convinced that the Belarusian people are capable of coping with the current complications on their own. The country’s leadership has confirmed its willingness to engage in a broad national dialogue aimed at promoting social harmony. President Lukashenko has put forward a proposal for constitutional reform. Once that reform process has been completed, the plan is to hold new presidential, parliamentary and local government elections. This represents an opportunity for the healthy elements of Belarusian society, that is, all those who want their country to evolve naturally, to defend, in a reasoned and truly civilized manner, their vision for the future of Belarus.

There is no point in others trying to foist on the Belarusian Government their “services” as mediators in its dialogue with the opposition. Taking any decision on that score is a sovereign right of Belarus. Any form of pressure in this matter will simply call up associations with the Agreement of 21 February 2014 between the Ukrainian authorities and the opposition. On that occasion, the mediators and guarantors of the measures agreed therein, who were drawn from Germany, France and Poland, did not try to prevent the unfolding of a bloody coup d’état in Kyiv. On the contrary, they forgot completely about their obligations – something that to this day they prefer not to be reminded of. The Western countries’ reputation as “honest brokers” has therefore been sorely dented. By implication this is also true of the OSCE.

It would be helpful if the foreign partners of the Belarusian Government were both to support the positive domestic trends of the past few days, during which demonstrations have taken place peacefully without any serious provocations, and to refrain from pandering to destructive forces. In any case, respect for the national sovereignty of the Republic of Belarus remains imperative. I hope that this premise is not a hollow slogan for those who are so zealous in their defence of democracy.

Thank you for your attention.