



**Address by the
OSCE Chairperson-in-Office
Prime Minister and Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania,
Edi Rama**

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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

A warm welcome to all of you, those who are here in the room, and those who are with us online, in these strange and difficult times.

As if there were not enough problems in the world as it is, the pandemic has forced all of us, all people, all countries, to make changes, but I am so pleased this meeting is happening, and I am always happy to be in Vienna.

It is to address another major problem that I called this meeting. The events in Belarus.

Belarus is just one country, it is one of our 57 participating States, and let us never forget one of the driving goals, one of the central promises the OSCE exists to keep: Security for – and cooperation among - each and every one of us.

So all of us, from Vladivostok to Vancouver - the eastern- and western- most borders of this great Organization created to care about 1 billion people – should care, and should do what we can to help; and the OSCE must do what it can, to help Belarus and the Belarussian people, at this very dangerous crossroads in their history.

It is hard, when the divisions are clearly so deep, and violence so near the surface, to grasp this so simple truth. But for the country to move forward, as safely and securely as possible, it will require mutual understanding and co-operation inside Belarus, and our role should be to help bring that about.

I want to make three things very clear from the outset.

First, however strong may be the opinions we hold, if we are to play this constructive role, it is not for us to interfere in the internal affairs between the high authorities of Belarus and the Belarussian society that have been playing out on the streets.

Second, however strong may be the feeling we as individuals or as individual states may have as we watch those scenes, if we are to play this constructive role, it is not for us to take sides.

Third, we are not looking, nor should we look, for the obsolete mediation role between both sides.

We simply want to help Belarus as one of us in this very critical moment.

Security for – and cooperation among - each and every one of us.

The concerns about the Presidential election, and the reasons for them, are obvious. The election could not be observed by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. This was worrying of itself, and those analyses that have been done of the vote have underlined the reasons behind the concern.

Then came the government's response to the protests that followed: a disproportionate use of force, widespread detentions, restrictions on freedom of the media and access to information and communications.

Monitoring by the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media indicates that over 100 journalists have been detained, deported or subject to violence. This is deeply alarming.

Even more alarming, and saddening, has been the loss of life, serious injury, and widespread reports of missing people.

The picture is ugly. To say the least. It is a potential nightmare for Belarus and its people, all of them – and I want to say it clearly - without distinction.

Let me quote an OSCE document consensually agreed here much earlier:

Human rights commitments “are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the States concerned.”

It is clear. We all have a legitimate interest here, a right to be heard. We cannot, must not, stand aside.

Belarus is here, is with us, as a friend. But friends must remind each other of important truths, and the authorities in Minsk need to hear this one...

The OSCE is founded on principles that include full respect for democracy and human rights. Our strength lies in the OSCE as an organization, and all of its States, being firmly based on, and respecting, these principles.

We are all committed to them, we must always be committed to them, there can be no retreat from them. There cannot be any ifs, and any buts, about this. These are principles, and they must be upheld.

Belarus is not the first country to reach this kind of moment, and sadly it is unlikely it will be the last.

That is why the initiative I am proposing today, the offer that the OSCE becomes a facilitator of the necessary dialogue to help Belarus out of this nightmare, goes beyond Belarus, here and now; that we develop within our organization this kind of vehicle, a facilitation function more generally, so that we can be ready to play a positive role when things go wrong.

The OSCE is well placed to support the facilitation of dialogue, to provide the space for reflection and cooling-down, to provide the process for calm, dispassionate third-party counselling.

We have between us so much experience and so much expertise, so much democratic energy and so much commitment of and to our participating States. Let us use it for good.

There must be dialogue between the government and the forces opposed to them, and we can play a role in helping that dialogue.

The sooner it starts the better it is for everyone, in Belarus and in this Organization, too, both to prevent further escalation, further violence, but because we know, however bad things are today, there will have to be reconciliation, there must come a moment of looking forward not back.

We can help with that, but we cannot resolve it.

It must be resolved in Minsk and among the people of Belarus, in full respect for their independence, their sovereignty and their human rights.

Right now, the signs are not good. There is no listening, no sharing, no dialogue at all. No understanding on how to help the country over that dangerous crossroads and find a common path forward.

In my capacity as OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, together with the Incoming Chairperson, my dear friend and distinguished colleague, the Swedish Foreign Minister, Ann Linde, I do stand ready to help create that opportunity.

And I would like to be able to help soon. For time runs faster when events feel like they are out of control.

To help break the ice that is getting thicker between both sides day by day. To help start a listening process among both sides. To help build a step-by-step mutual understanding. To support the people of Belarus in choosing, themselves and for their country, the way forward. To help them right away, now, any moment they would wish to take and use our offer, and in full respect.

We truly hope that there will be a positive response to this offer from the Government of Belarus, which did in the aftermath of the election, express readiness to engage in a constructive dialogue with foreign counterparts.

That is what we want to help bring about in Belarus – constructive dialogue that may help resolve the crisis and shape the path forward.

We are motivated by nothing but the desire to help. Far from this being the OSCE imposing itself on Belarus from the outside, it is the opposite. It is the OSCE volunteering itself and its good offices, and its goodwill, for Belarus to make use of. Belarus as an active, sovereign, equal member of our community

This offer comes from an Organization which prides itself on being inclusive, which bridges east and west, which has a well-established mandate relevant to democracy, human rights and conflict prevention, and which has long been committed to a vision of “a comprehensive, co-operative and indivisible security community”.

I strongly believe this combines to make OSCE uniquely placed to assist Belarus in this dangerous and difficult moment.

I know some have raised the issue of the February 2014 agreement about Ukraine and what followed. True, what followed wasn't what was agreed among all participants, and emotions ran very high. But let us be careful not to re-run the blame game from that time, not to be so pessimistic that because disappointment for some followed the efforts then, we should stand aside from trying to help now. Let us learn lessons from failure, not assume failure always comes.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very conscious of the duty to be inclusive, balanced and transparent as Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE.

Let me take this opportunity to make some additional points, should a role for the OSCE, and a visit to Minsk, be accepted.

Firstly, the Albanian Chairmanship will approach this endeavour with no predetermined political agendas. To repeat – it is for the Belarussians to agree upon the way forward for Belarus.

Secondly, the Chairmanship will work tirelessly and patiently to create conditions conducive to a helpful process. We will make sure it will remain as such all the way, by accompanying our Belarussian friends in their endeavour and not trying to impose anything on them.

Lastly, and crucially, the Chairmanship maintains that any agreements reached and any guarantees offered must be honoured by all sides and by the entire international community. If we sign up to something we must stick to it! Otherwise, hard-won progress can be undone and we will have to struggle to recover.

But given what I said earlier about our principles, one thing must be absolutely clear, and we must all be agreed upon it...

There has to be an immediate and significant improvement in the national human rights situation. Now. Not sometime in the future, but right now, with no ifs and no buts. It is inconceivable to believe there can be a credible process of dialogue if one side appears keen to undo the very essence of a pluralistic society.

When I opened the Albanian Chairmanship in January, I listed “building stability through dialogue” and “implementing our commitments together” as two of our key objectives for 2020.

It seems these two objectives feel particularly relevant right here, right now.

Facilitating a genuine and inclusive dialogue may not be an easy process. This is however the only way forward in any sustainable democracy.

Our Organization can make such a positive prospect possible.

I am ready to make it work - to engage, to listen, to understand and to support, in every possible way I can. And I am sure we are all ready to make it work, in every possible way we can.

So I appeal today to the Belarus authorities: please, give this offer a chance.

Seize this moment of opportunity for Belarus to move from confrontation and strife to dialogue and reconciliation.

And I appeal to all OSCE members, let's try to make this work, hard though we know this will be.

We owe it to the men, women and children of Belarus, to have their voices heard so that they, through dialogue not violence, can determine their own future.

Thank you very much.