



Delegation of Canada
to the OSCE

Délégation du Canada
auprès de l'OSCE

**STATEMENT BY AMBASSADOR JOCELYN KINNEAR
ON THE POLITICAL PRISONERS IN BELARUS
1408th MEETING OF THE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

26 January 2023

Mr. Chair,

I would like to add my voice to those of other delegations in this Council, and express Canada's serious concern over the human rights situation in Belarus, which continues to be deeply troubling.

Since 2020, the authorities in Belarus have continued a brutal crackdown on defenders of democracy in Belarus, including civil society and independent voices. The exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association, has been repressed, and those attempting to exercise these rights and freedoms have been subject to intimidation, harassment, abuse and arbitrary detention.

According to credible reports, the number of political prisoners is now close to 1500.

This includes many journalists, media actors, opposition figures, and human rights defenders, as well as ordinary Belarusians attempting to exercise their fundamental rights.

We are gravely concerned about recent developments in Belarus including the beginning of a trial *in absentia* of leaders of the democratic opposition, including Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Pavel Latushka, and the ongoing, politically motivated trials of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aleś Bialiatski, as well as two other members of his Viasna human rights centre.

The ongoing arbitrary detention and imprisonment of civil society leaders is clear evidence of the regime's desire to repress Belarusians and silence dissent and opposition. Ms. Tsikhanouskaya has been accused of treason, conspiracy with a view to overthrowing the government and incitement to hatred. These fabricated charges represent yet another desperate attempt by the Lukashenka regime to use any means at their disposal to hold onto power.

Mr. Chair,

I would like to take a moment to reflect on Belarus' course over the past 2.5 years. I arrived at the OSCE very shortly after the fraudulent 2020 elections. It was a moment of hope and unity in Belarus, as tens upon tens of thousands of Belarusians took to the streets in peaceful protest and inspired the world. They weren't asking for anything radical; they were asking for democracy, justice and human rights in their country. The Belarusian protesters were courageous and perseverant: even in the face of mass arrests and systemic and brutal torture, as reported by many who witnessed or experienced it first hand, the brave people of Belarus continued their peaceful protests, month after month.

But Aleksander Lukashenka would not and did not respect the will of the Belarusian people and accept a peaceful transfer of power. Instead, he obtained the backing of Vladimir Putin to remain in power and with this backing, he used unrelenting brute force to drive the Belarusians out of the streets and into silence, be that in their homes or in Belarusian prisons.

The price of this backing has not only been extracted from the Belarusian people, but also, for the past year, from the Ukrainian people, as Lukashenka has given the use of Belarusian territory to the Russian Armed Forces to enable and deepen Putin's brutal war against Ukraine. Today, 11 more Ukrainians were reported killed and 11 more injured by Russian missile strikes.

Allowing Belarus' territory to be used in this war is yet another act by Lukashenka against the interest and will of the Belarusian people. If we are frank, it is not even clear that it is in Lukashenka's own interest to support Putin's war, except that it is the price he must pay to remain in power. The currency he pays in is Belarusian freedom and Ukrainian lives.

As for the Belarusian people, their clear interest in this war is that Ukraine wins: because an independent and democratic Ukraine can only help to create the conditions for an independent and democratic Belarus; a Belarus where the courts are not subservient to a dictator; a Belarus where speaking Belarusian in the street is not seen as a subversive act; a Belarus where Belarusians are free to choose their own future as a nation.

Mr. Chair,

In November 2022, I read a statement on behalf of 38 participating states requesting Belarus to provide genuine answers to this Council, including a detailed explanation of their reactions to the recommendations contained in the 5 November 2020 report under the OSCE Moscow Mechanism, and the 2021 Vienna Mechanism. We have heard nothing but silence and witnessed nothing but continued repression and complicity.

Canada supports the people of Belarus in their fight for democracy and human rights. We condemn the Lukashenka regime's activities supporting the Russia's unjustifiable war of aggression against Ukraine.

We call for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners in Belarus. We call on the Belarusian authorities to fully implement their international obligations and OSCE commitments.

Thank you, Mr. Chair