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SPECIAL PROCEDURES
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SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON THE SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN BELARUS

Agenda item 4: Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

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Excellencies, Distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my honour to submit for the consideration of the Human Rights Council my second report, which provides an overview of human rights developments from 1 April 2025 through 31 March 2026. The report also focuses on cultural rights. As you have all received the report, I will be very brief in my remarks, so that I can devote more time to addressing your questions and concerns.

The period in question saw the early release of more than 400 political prisoners. However, until recently, releases were followed by expulsions from the country and frequent cancellations of passports and other identity documents. More recent releases have seen some people able to remain in Belarus, though many continue to face ongoing pressure, surveillance and professional restrictions. I continue to receive regular reports from those released of torture, ill treatment, inadequate conditions of detention, lack of access to urgent medical care, and insufficient or poor-quality food.

Overall repression has continued unabated, with the number of political prisoners remaining largely stable, because of intensified targeting of supporters of Ukraine, media workers, book publishers, and LGBTI persons. Moreover, the reporting period saw a sharp increase in materials arbitrarily designated as "extremist," which has created increased human rights risks for people seeking to receive or impart information.

I decided to focus on cultural rights in this report for several reasons. The topic has been largely neglected by others, but I think it is important, as it is what makes Belarus Belarusian, what makes Belarus distinctive. Cultural repression has a long-term impact, as language, memory, and cultural production which is repressed today cannot easily be transmitted to future generations. The field of culture also reflects larger geopolitical trends, as it mirrors the growing influence of Russia in the country and state-sponsored anti-Western narratives.

In preparing the report, I consulted with my colleague the UN Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights, whose reports frequently focus on participation in cultural life without discrimination, diversity, and history/memory politics. Participation in cultural life in Belarus is several curtailed and subject to frequent discrimination on political or linguistic grounds. Much of Belarus 'natural ethnic, religious

and other kinds of diversity has been replaced by a stultifying homogeneity. The authorities have also facilitated the growing role of the Russian language and Russo-Soviet historical narratives. Indeed, use of the Belarusian language is often treated as a sign of political disloyalty. In the realm of education, the authorities have also increasingly promoted the militarization of education, which also mirrors developments in Russia.

A large number of cultural figures have been targeted in the broader wave of repression which has swept over Belarus since 2020. This includes actors, artists, writers, book publishers, journalists, scholars, heritage and language activists, and ethnic and religious minority figures. I would particularly highlight the targeting of Polish and Lithuanian minority activists, restrictions on native language education opportunities, and heightened control on cross-border cultural contacts. In addition, Catholic and Protestant clergy and activists have been targeted.

All of these points and more are elaborated upon in the report, but I will stop now. I am eager to hear your questions and to address them as best I can.