Statement by the Group of Independent Experts on Belarus

19 March 2025

To be delivered by: Karinna Moskalenko, Chair of the Group of Independent Experts on Belarus

Mr. President,
Distinguished Delegates,

I am grateful for the opportunity to address the Human Rights Council today, on behalf of the Group of Independent Experts on Belarus together with Dr. Susan Bazilli and Prof. Monika Płatek. Our Group is pleased to present the Human Rights Council with the report requested in its resolution 55/27.

Let us start by stressing that we very much regret that the Government of Belarus has not engaged and cooperated with our Group as requested in this Council's resolution 55/27. The Group repeatedly requested access to the country and information necessary to carry out its mandate as well as detailed information on the steps taken to prevent and investigate deaths in detention. The Group did not receive any response to those requests.

I will start by reporting on the activities we have undertaken since our last interactive dialogue in September. Despite the impact of the liquidity crisis on our staffing and operational capacity, our Group held a number of consultations on accountability with various stakeholders, including representatives of the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, national authorities in countries hosting Belarusian refugees, civil society organizations, the OSCE and members of the diplomatic community. The Group also held regular meetings with the Special Rapporteur on Belarus.

In line with our enhanced accountability mandate, we established the State structures that have enabled the human rights violations. We prepared a list of all State entities involved in the commission of the violations, and we preserved and analyzed public statements from high-level Belarusian officials. We mapped out all detention facilities in which torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment have been documented. We prepared a consolidated list of all individuals allegedly responsible for human rights violations since May 2020, and we are currently preparing individual profiles of persons of interest, namely those who bear the greatest responsibility for human rights violations.

Mr. President,

Let me now turn to the current human rights situation in Belarus.

Our team conducted interviews with Belarusians in exile to identify *the root causes of the human rights violations committed since 1 May 2020*. We determined that the violent response of the Belarusian authorities to the unprecedented mass protests that had preceded and followed the 2020 presidential election was not an isolated incident, but the latest manifestation of a long-standing pattern of governance. We considered that several interconnected structural factors, including the absence of truly democratic institutions, the lack of an independent judiciary, the perception of civil society as a threat and a culture of impunity, have set the stage for the human rights violations we have observed since 2020. Until those structural factors are addressed, the repression and violence are likely to continue, forcing more Belarusians into exile.

The recent results of the January 2025 presidential elections represent more root causes of the repression in Belarus. There were no candidates to mount genuine opposition to President Lukashenko with hundreds of thousands of Belarusians in exile and more than 1200 political prisoners remaining in detention.

A*rbitrary arrest and detention* have become a permanent fixture of the repressive tactics of Belarusian authorities. In contrast to previous election cycles, when mass arrests would occur for some time after the elections and then subside, the wave of arrests and detentions that began shortly before the presidential election in 2020 has persisted to the present day. In 2024, courts tried more than 7,500 people on politically motivated charges. This is an increase of 100 a month compared with 2023.

We have ample evidence that those arrested on political grounds in the last four years were subjected to *torture and ill-treatment*. Out of the 161 interviewed persons who had been arrested at least once, 52 were victims of ill-treatment, and sometimes torture, during arrest, transportation, interrogation or detention. We found that Belarusian authorities continued to apply a harsher regime of detention on those arrested on politically motivated charges. Men and women who served short sentences in temporary detention facilities were systematically subjected to discriminatory, degrading and punitive conditions of detention amounting to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and, in some instances, torture. We also documented several cases of torture and ill-treatment in penal colonies across the country.

Ahead of the 2025 presidential election, Belarusian authorities continued their efforts to *purge the civic and democratic space* from all potential sources of dissent. Last year, another 228 civil society organizations were liquidated. In addition, 87 entities and 1,168 persons were added to the "extremist" lists, rendering to criminal prosecution. Authorities tightened their control of schools

and religious communities and introduced legislative measures drastically restricting forms of LGBTQ+ expression. They expanded the surveillance capabilities of law enforcement bodies and launched criminal proceedings in absentia against hundreds of Belarusians in exile, exposing them to imprisonment on return.

We have reasonable grounds to believe that some of human rights violations documented in our report amount to the *crimes against humanity of political persecution and imprisonment*. The Group established that the orchestrated campaign of violence was directed against Belarusians perceived as being critical or opposed to the Government.

The continued involvement of multiple State actors within the security apparatus, and a complete lack of accountability, suggests that the attack against the civilian population remains ongoing, widespread, systematic, carried out in furtherance of government policy. The violations and crimes engage both the responsibility of the State of Belarus and individual criminal responsibility.

Mr. President,

Ensuring accountability for these violations and related crimes is imperative to ensure their non-recurrence. Belarusian authorities systematically fail to investigate, prosecute and punish the human rights violations and crimes committed in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election. With a judiciary in the hands of the executive, the systematic punishment of lawyers, and systemic fair trial rights' violations, Belarus clearly demonstrates its inability and unwillingness to prosecute international crimes under its jurisdiction.

For that reason, we believe that accountability initiatives must come from the international community. Several countries have already responded in a range of ways, including through a state referral to the International Criminal Court and by opening domestic investigations under the universal jurisdiction principle. Pursuing accountability at the international level and in third countries are not mutually exclusive options, nor do they prevent future judicial proceedings in Belarus. We therefore encourage all stakeholders to consider these options, and to continue documenting evidence for future processes.

In conclusion, we urge members of the Human Rights Council to continue to pay close attention to developments in Belarus. We stand ready to continue to investigate whether credible progress is being made in advancing justice, accountability and respect for human rights, and to give a voice to the Belarusians who entrust us with their stories of loss and hope for a better future in Belarus.

Thank you for your attention.