Statement at a Press Briefing on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus on the Eve of Presidential Elections

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Thank you for you interest in the human rights situation in Belarus. I would also like to thank the Belarusian Association of Journalists and Leanid Sudalenko for assistance in organising this event, but I would like to emphasise that I speak for myself in my capacity as United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus

Why am I holding a press briefing now? You may have heard about an event taking place this Sunday, January 26, in Belarus. Mr. Lukashenka calls it presidential elections. Human rights defenders in exile add an asterisk to the word elections* to emphasise the perfunctory nature of the term in the country. Others call it an electoral "performance," an electoral "special operation," "sham" or "fake" elections.

My mandate is not to name the event on Sunday, but to look at the situation of human rights, including in the run-up to this Sunday. I have been in office less than three months, but I have already met with many in the exile community online, in Riga, Vilnius and Warsaw. I have also been to Geneva to meet with UN colleagues.

I intend to devote part of my first report to the Human Rights Council to the right to vote and be elected in genuine periodic elections and to other human rights issues surrounding elections. I am still gathering information and data, so today I will be sharing only some preliminary observations. My predecessor also devoted a report in 2019 to human rights and elections, noting that elections have often been a catalyst for human rights violations in Belarus.

The same is true now. Free elections require freedom of opinion, expression and freedom of the media. They require freedom of association. And they require freedom of peaceful assembly. Moreover, they require technical arrangements to ensure that election commissions are transparent and representative, that there are no undue restrictions on candidacy or voting rights, the existence of procedural safeguards, and no undue limits on election observation. None of this is in place.

Human rights civil society organisations count at least 1254 political prisoners as of this week. This is a huge number for a country the size of Belarus. Repression continues with both criminal and administrative cases of politically motivated prosecutions. Since the summer, several pardons have taken place reportedly affecting some 250 persons. Much repression is hidden, because people are afraid to discuss what has happened to them and the authorities do not publish much information.

Repression sometimes targets family members. We also have such cruel practices as repetitive convictions or arbitrary extensions of prison terms. The repression is transnational in nature, targeting people who have already left the country. The best

known political prisoners are opposition politicians and human rights defenders, including 2022 Nobel prize laureate Ales Bialiatski. Repression has also targeted lawyers who have worked on politically sensitive cases. This year, the Day of the Endangered Lawyer is devoted to Belarus and a number of events will mark the day this week.

In an atmosphere of pervasive fear of repression, free elections cannot take place.

The media situation remains horrendous. In 2024 Reporters without Borders ranked Belarus in 167th place out of 180 countries, 10 places worse than the previous year. Almost all independent media outlets, websites, and social media channels have been shut down since 2020. As of year's end, civil society experts estimated that there are at least 45 journalists and media workers behind bars, with an increase in repression at the end of 2024. The authorities use anti-terrorist and anti-extremist legislation to persecute people for consuming independent media, reposting stories or even liking them. Another common tool of repression is defamation legislation. Many people are persecuted for insulting an authority figure or "discrediting Belarus."

If voters cannot form opinions independently and receive or transmit election information freely, the elections are not free.

Freedom of association and assembly remains severely restricted, affecting political parties, NGOs, bar associations, trade unions, religious and cultural organisations and others. In 2023 a law was passed requiring all political parties to re-register. The number of parties declined from 16 to four and all are now loyal to the government. Civil society experts estimate that there are over 100 civil society representatives in detention. The forced liquidation of NGOs is ongoing, but it is difficult to assess numbers because some suspended their activities, others have relocated abroad, while others continue to operate under the umbrella of enterprises or underground. The right to peaceful assembly has been crushed since the 2020 protests.

When one cannot form and operate political parties or participate in civil society organisations or assemble peacefully to receive or impart information, political pluralism and political competition cannot be ensured, which is the essence of free elections.

I will not go into the technical organisation of elections, as the campaign Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections have issued a number of useful analytical reports on the formation of territorial election commissions, the nomination and registration of candidates, and the formation of precinct commissions. Suffice it to say that the organisation of elections was carried out so that there will be no doubt about the outcome, no surprises, and no real choice. There will be no independent election monitoring by civil society or the OSCE, which was invited only a few days ago. Do not believe the monitoring results of Mr. Lukashenka's friends and allies.

What will take place on Sunday will be neither free nor fair.

I look forward to the day when the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus will no longer be needed. I look forward to the day that the Group of Independent Experts on Belarus - another UN-mandated investigative body - will have finished its work and those guilty of human rights violations are held to account.

What is next on my agenda? The UN has issued a call for inputs for my first report, which will focus on human rights issues surrounding elections and the situation of political

prisoners. This week I will participate in two events together with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers to mark the Day of the Endangered Lawyer, which is devoted to Belarus. Next week I will travel to Brussels to meet with European Union interlocutors - you may know that the European Parliament just passed a strongly worded resolution on Belarus. Together with other special mandate holders, we just published a news release on human rights concerns related to in absentia trials. In February we will publish a long allegation letter to the Belarusian authorities on this same topic.

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to addressing your questions.