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Statement delivered by

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Arria – Media freedom in Belarus

New York, 01/22/2021

I would like to thank Estonia for organizing this important meeting, as well as the briefers for sharing their insights with us. Their interventions paint a bleak picture of the deteriorating human rights situation in Belarus, particularly illustrated by today's topic: the freedom of media.

Since the elections in Belarus, which were neither free nor fair, the Belarussian government has persistently ignored the call of the Belarussian people for democratic change. Systematic human rights abuses continue to be committed by Belarussian security forces, as confirmed by the report of Mr. Wolfgang BENEDEK, rapporteur under the OSCE Moscow Mechanism. Belgium calls for full implementation of its recommendations. Several UN human rights experts also strongly condemned the increased reported mass detentions, intimidation and torture in their statement of 19th November 2020.

Today, we would like to recall the Joint Statement on the protection of journalists in Belarus of 28 September 2020, co-signed by Belgium. We strongly condemn all attacks on the freedom of media, both online and offline. We reiterate our call on the Belarussian authorities to immediately put an end to the violent crackdown on journalists and media workers and to unconditionally and immediately release those detained. The Belarussian authorities must provide an enabling environment for journalists and media workers, including international journalists. We further call for full accountability by ensuring independent investigations into all allegations of human rights violations and abuses, access to justice and redress for victims. Finally, we call for full cooperation with the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus, Ms. Anaïs Marin and the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of freedom of opinion and expression, Ms. Irene KHAN.

Free, independent and pluralistic media are a cornerstone of any functioning democracy and essential for the protection of all other human rights. Not only is the respect for and observance of

human rights a key principle of this organization, but it is also a driver for peace and stability. Human rights violations, such as attacks on the media, can therefore be an indicator for potential conflict. Recognizing them in time allows us to help prevent conflicts from erupting. We therefore strongly **encourage the further coordination and development of synergies** between the various stakeholders, including the UN Security Council and the Human Rights Council.

A democratic transition in Belarus, which would allow Belarussian citizens to shape the future they want for their country, requires the full respect of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of Belarussian citizens, including the freedoms of assembly, media and expression. As a member of the European Union and of the OSCE, Belgium will continue to support a democratic, independent, sovereign, prosperous and stable Belarus.

I thank you.