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Mr. President, Excellences, Distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The report I have the honor of presenting today focuses on counter-terrorism and anti-extremism policies adopted in Belarus in recent years. It provides a chilling tale of how the legislation has been misused since 2020 for purging civic space, suppressing free expression and eradicating political opposition.

Its preparation has not been easy, since I am *non grata* in the country. Most of the communications I addressed to the Belarusian authorities remained unanswered. And dozens of human rights defenders are currently behind bars. Despite these challenges, I could gather valuable first-hand testimonies from Belarusians who fled abroad. I wish to use this opportunity to thank them for their input, and warn them against returning to Belarus, where their human rights would not be guaranteed.

Mr President,

My findings show that the authorities have been labelling and prosecuting as “terrorists” or “extremists” all those who dare to speak up against the Government and its violations of human rights.

Belarus has been spared by terrorism so far, but counterterrorism laws proliferated. The scope of the death penalty has been extended to include loosely defined crimes of “planned” or “attempted” acts of terrorism. Capital punishment can now be applied against State officials and military personnel convicted of high treason. In addition, a punishment of seven-year imprisonment was introduced for “propaganda of terrorism or its public justification”, with very high fines attached. Dozens of individuals who sought to document or obstruct the transit through Belarusian territory of Russian troops and military equipment for the war in Ukraine have been convicted for alleged terrorism.

When it comes to fighting “extremism”, the law was amended to close down public space for the free expression of any dissenting opinion. Vague legislative provisions can be interpreted to include activities related to the legitimate exercise of human rights. This allowed to prosecute opposition-minded civil society activists and politicians, human rights defenders, lawyers, independent journalists, academics and cultural workers for “extremism”. Calling for sanctions against the Government of Belarus now falls under the category of “crimes related to extremism”.

Excellences,

Such weaponization of the law is possible because fair trial guarantees are inexistent in Belarus, as I alerted you about in my 2020 report. Since then, the practice of holding court hearings behind closed doors, of imposing non-disclosure clauses on lawyers, and massively disbarring those defending clients in politically motivated trials have become widespread... As a result, court proceedings in extremism and terrorism cases are subtracted from public scrutiny, and the defendants’ presumption of innocence is always violated.

What is more, individuals accused of extremist or terrorist crimes who reside abroad can now be tried *in absentia*. Whereas court hearings are frequently held online, defendants

in exile have reported being systematically denied the possibility of online participation in their trial. If convicted of “extremist activities” or “damaging the interests” of Belarus, these exiles can now be stripped of their citizenship.

Distinguished Delegates,

My report evidences that the authorities and pro-government media are systematically labelling as “extremist” anyone who participated in the protests following the contested 2020 election. The “extremist” label was used against journalists who reported on these events, human rights defenders who offered legal assistance to detained protesters, and those who raised funds in support of their families.

Those accused of involvement in so-called extremist activities are systematically harassed, shamed, and sanctioned. The KGB compiles lists of extremist organisations and individuals. Blacklisting proceeds outside of any judicial control, without clear requirements for evidence and no chance for those targeted to challenge the decision. As of today, 3429 individuals are listed as “extremists”.

As for organizations on the “extremist” list, they are banned in Belarus. This includes most independent media and several human rights defence organizations. Reference to such organizations, verbal or material support to them, or subscription to their Telegram channels expose people to intimidation, arbitrary detention and ill-treatment.

The Ministry of Information for its part maintains a list of “extremist materials” exposed to censorship. The list has grown exponentially to include the websites, social network accounts and Youtube or Telegram channels of human rights organisations, independent unions and media, but also literature or artwork deemed extremist because they are not to the Government’s liking. In the year 2021 alone, 426 such materials were recognized as extremist. Since 2022, over 1000 new entries were added, including fiction, poetry and history books, many of them because they were written in Belarusian. Distributing materials and symbols recognized as extremist exposes to administrative liability and fines. This virtually targets anyone sharing posts in group chats, liking such posts, wearing a national symbol labelled as extremist, displaying it at home or even in private correspondence.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The vagueness of the legislation, its instrumentalization in support of political repression, and the lack of fair trial guarantees are not my only concerns. In recent years numerous show trials have deterred anyone disagreeing with the authorities from expressing their opinion, while the right to freedom of assembly has been virtually eradicated. In 2021, a new Code of Administrative Offences came into force, increasing the fines and terms of administrative detention for violating the procedure for organizing or holding mass events.

People convicted on “extremism” charges are shamed and banned from pedagogical activities, publishing, and holding government or elected positions. In some cases, courts have reportedly ordered compulsory treatment in a psychiatric hospital for people charged with “extremist” activities.

Based on the information received, the penitentiary authorities are particularly harsh against detainees who have been added onto the list of extremist individuals: many were repeatedly sent to isolation cells for long periods of time, irrespective of their state of health and in violation of international human rights standards. The banalisation of such *incommunicado* detention for petty violations of prison rules specifically targets dissidents. I have grounds to suspect that it is meant to dissimulate evidence of torture and ill-treatment, and, in some cases, enforced disappearance even. My requests for proof of life remained unaddressed.

To conclude,

The whole range of human rights obligations assumed by Belarus is being compromised under the pretext of fighting extremism and terrorism. I am therefore calling on the authorities to conduct a thorough review of the legislation, in line with international human rights standards, and to engage in a constructive dialogue with all international human rights mechanisms, including of course my mandate.

The Government of Belarus must stop weaponizing counterterrorism and anti-extremism law for stifling peaceful political dissidence, civic activism and human rights advocacy, and allow for independent journalism, academic and cultural work to be conducted unhampered. I reiterate my demand that all those sentenced to prison terms on politically motivated charges, including of alleged "extremism" or "terrorism", be immediately and unconditionally released.

Thank you for your attention, and for your own efforts to that end.