

## What can the OSCE do in Belarus?

*Many politicians and commentators have called for the involvement of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Belarus. The OSCE is a security body which includes 57 participating states, including Belarus, all EU member states, the US and Canada, as well as Russia. It has a comprehensive approach to security that encompasses politico-military, economic and environmental, and human aspects. Andrew Bruce (DRI co-founder) and Michael Meyer-Resende (executive director), who both worked at the OSCE in the past, list what the organization could do.*

1. A visit by the OSCE Chairmanship to Belarus. The current OSCE chairmanship, Albania, has [already offered](#) this option, together with the 2021 chairmanship (Sweden). Practically, this would be a visit by the foreign ministers of the two countries (Edi Rama of Albania, who serves as foreign minister and prime minister, and Ann Linde of Sweden). Such a visit would be political. It would be a first step and not in itself represent a mediation attempt or something similar. They would report back to all 57 OSCE participating States and may also make a public statement. If the invitation is taken up by the Belarus authorities, they would try to talk to all sides, while observing diplomatic protocol.

2. The two chairmanships<sup>1</sup> could offer to return for more visits to discuss a way forward, but the standard practice would be for the current chairmanship to appoint a [special representative](#) (or special envoy, or some other title) with a mandate to meet with the government and other players and identify steps to resolve the crisis. They could also try to obtain a request from the government to receive a fact-finding mission/needs-assessment mission/expert mission with a defined mandate.

3. The Special Representative of the Chair-in-Office could propose a range of interventions, including a roundtable, or national dialogue between representatives from the Belarusian government, the civil society and the political opposition (Coordination Council). Although not standard practice for the OSCE, this would be within its conflict prevention mandate.<sup>2</sup> In line with past practices, a Special Representative would be likely to seek agreement for the conduct of new elections, which would presumably include the establishment of a broad-based election management body which enjoys public confidence to create the conditions for democratic elections. The OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) could then advise such a body on reform of the legal and regulatory framework and, subsequently, observe the new elections.<sup>3</sup> At any stage in the process, ODIHR could also be requested to deploy either a human rights mission or a mission to monitor trials of those involved in the protests. ODIHR has monitored many elections in Belarus and, in 2011, also monitored trials. On 19 August, it [expressed alarm](#) about the increasing threats to human rights, following the presidential election.

4. The OSCE can open a field mission/country office with a mandate of conflict prevention/monitoring political and human rights situation. However, the Belarus authorities worked hard to close two previous Belarus field missions (OSCE Office in Minsk, which operated from 2003 to 2011, and OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group, which operated from 1998 to 2002) and it is unlikely it will agree to this (also all OSCE participating States would have to agree).

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<sup>1</sup> The chairmanship could also work in Troika format, also involving Slovakia, the OSCE's chairmanship of 2019.

<sup>2</sup> High-level mediation by the OSCE typically takes place in conflicts in which several participating States are involved. The OSCE has also supported mediation in domestic contexts, but usually on specific localised conflicts (for example in Southern Serbia or Srebrenica/Bosnia-Herzegovina).

<sup>3</sup> In a few cases, the OSCE has itself organised elections (in OSCE parlance this is called "election supervision"), but this is not a likely option for Belarus as it requires a wide presence and a wide-ranging mandate. The OSCE supervised elections in this sense in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. Where the OSCE supervises elections, it does not observe them, as it would represent a conflict of interest.

Briefing put together by

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5. The OSCE can also initiate the “Moscow mechanism”, whereby an OSCE participating State with the support of nine others can insist on the establishment of an official fact-finding mission to investigate the situation in a participating State if it is concerned that there are serious human rights problems. If the state concerned refuses entry to the mission, it can work from abroad (as already happened with the Belarus mission of Emmanuel Decaux in 2011). The Moscow mechanism is a political instrument which can be time-consuming to initiate and implement.

6. The OSCE comprises 57 participation States. Major decisions are made by unanimity, but the chair-in-office and its institutions, including ODIHR, have some margin of manoeuvre in offering assistance to participating States, but at the invitation of the state concerned.

**Conclusion: The OSCE can do a number of useful things and could be one element in a strategy to avoid violent conflict and bring democracy to Belarus. It could become particularly relevant if the government (and Russia) decided to enter into some form of negotiation within an international framework.**