**Statement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic**

**Human Rights Council, 46th Session, 22nd February 2021**

Madam President,

Madam High Commissioner,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Covid-19 pandemic is without a doubt one of the most serious challenges we have experienced in our lifetime. More than one hundred million people infected and more than two million deaths worldwide is a dreadful toll we had to pay. While the numbers are still rising, new variants of the virus emerge and the long-term impact of the disease on our health is not yet fully known.

Yet, as if this merciless health, economic and social crisis was not a big enough challenge, we have witnessed in a number of countries that some governments use this situation as an opportunity to push their own non-democratic agenda, further restrict civil and political rights and crack down on political opponents. This very pandemic is a painful lesson learned about the importance of freedom of information and freedom of media. However, instead of focusing on cooperation with civil society, we could see a surge in arrests of independent journalists, human rights defenders and pro-democracy activists.

These are the situations when the Human Rights Council has to speak up and prove its raison d'être. Say it loud and clear that the current pandemic situation cannot be misused for silencing democracy, attacking human rights and the rule of law. I use this opportunity and reiterate our full support for the mandate and for the work of the High Commissioner. Members of the Council need to strive for the highest possible human rights standards and they must respect and implement these standards in their own countries. Only then, the Human Rights Council can sustain its credibility. We need to lead by example.

The Czech Republic has entered the last year of its current membership. I am proud to say that together with our core group partners, we have been able to actively contribute to the work of the Council and present relevant resolutions and joint statements in both our national initiatives: equal participation in political and public affairs and freedom of peaceful assembly and association. Promotion of human rights is a traditional priority of the Czech foreign policy and will remain so. Building on the unique legacy of President Václav Havel and on our experience with transition to democracy, we are determined to support democratic values and human rights also in the years to come. Therefore, with your kind support we aspire for a membership in the Human Right Council for the term 2025 – 2027.

Madam High Commissioner,

The Czech Republic supports a strong multilateral human rights system, which has the ability to swiftly respond to human rights violations and abuses around the world. No country has a spotless human rights record. Identifying the problem is the first step towards a positive change. The Human Rights Council represents a key forum in this regard. Adequate financing of the human rights pillar, including through UN regular budget, is crucial.

Unfortunately, examples of violations of human rights, including the right to participate in public affairs, abound. We highly appreciate the work of the High Commissioner and the Fact Finding Mission in Venezuela. Those responsible for extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention or torture must be held accountable. The legislative elections held on 6 December 2020 in Venezuela were illegitimate. Only credible, inclusive and transparent presidential and legislative elections and unconditional release of all political prisoners can contribute to finding a way out of the crisis. We call once again for the resumption of a political dialogue between the regime and all sectors of democratic opposition including the interim president Juan Guaidó.

We have similar concerns as regards the situation in Belarus. According to the Professor Benedek´s Moscow Mechanism report, the allegations that the presidential elections in Belarus of August 9 2020 were not transparent, free and fair were confirmed. The human rights abuses were found to be massive and systematic and proven beyond doubt. One of his recommendations to the international community is to establish an independent international body for the in-depth investigation of human rights violations in the context of the presidential elections. We fully agree that effective measures that would help to end impunity and ensure accountability should be put in place.

We are also extremely concerned by the Russian authorities´ continued attempts to shrink the space for opposition, civil society and independent voices in the country. Detention of political opponents is against Russia´s international commitments. Similarly, legislation on “undesirable organisations” should be repealed and brought in line with Russia´s own commitments under European and international human rights law. The Czech Republic strongly opposes disproportionate legal and administrative restrictions on civil society organisations worldwide as they unacceptably close the space for the civil society, an essential component of democratic and inclusive societies.

We condemn the recent military coup in Myanmar and express our support to country´s legitimate leadership. Results of the November 2020 parliamentary elections must be respected. The Czech Republic has always supported transition to democracy and efforts to promote lasting peace, freedom, human rights and prosperity for all the people of Myanmar.

The Czech Republic consistently puts an emphasis on respect for the principles of democracy and the rule of law. A State´s readiness to protect human rights should be measured also by its fulfilment of international law commitments. The Czech Republic would like to emphasize the need to respect Hong Kong´s autonomy and all democratic principles guaranteed by the Hong Kong Basic Law.

Madam President, I wish you and the whole bureau all success in steering the Council, you can count on our full support. Madam High Commissioner, you have our full support too. We have trust in your leadership and look forward for an open cooperation with you and your Office.

Thank you.