

Belarus: Unprecedented crackdown on human rights defenders, civil society activists and independent journalists must be stopped



Statement by the Civic Solidarity Platform

17 February 2021

Following a renewed wave of persecution of the Belarusian human rights defenders, civil society activists and independent journalists, members of the Civic Solidarity Platform (CSP) strongly condemn actions of the Belarusian authorities and urge them to stop the harassment and show genuine respect towards the rights of those who seek to protect the rights of their fellow citizens and not to

criminalize their legitimate human rights work.

On 16 February 2021, over 40 human rights activists and journalists have seen their offices and houses being searched as a part of a concerted crackdown against the civil society of Belarus. The police raided the central office of the Belarusian Association of Journalists and the two Minsk offices of the Human Rights Center Viasna, as well as Viasna's office in Mahilioŭ. The central office of the independent Belarusian Radio and Electronic Industry Workers' Union REP was also searched.

The raid affected the private apartments of numerous human rights defenders, including BAJ leaders Andrei Bastunets, Barys Haretski and Aleh Aheyev, as well as the organisation's legal adviser Kristina Richter, Viasna Chairperson Ales Bialiatsky, and Viasna members Andrei Paluda, Pavel Sapelka and Dzmitry Salauyou and several Viasna activists in other cities. Several dozen human rights defenders and journalists and their relatives were targeted in Mahilioŭ, Brest, Viciebsk, Homieĺ, Mazyr, Rečyca, Baranavičy and other cities. The apartment of the coordinator of the BySol initiative Andrej Stryzhak and the apartment of his parents were also searched. Although most of the activists were released without charges, equipment, cash, bank cards and personal belongings of human rights defenders and journalists have been confiscated by the authorities. A few activists remain in detention.

According to the official statement of the Investigative Committee of the Republic of Belarus, the searches are supposedly linked to a criminal case opened under Article 342 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus ("organisation and preparation of actions that grossly violate the public order, or active participation in them") and the likely charges will include "funding of the protests". The current wave of detentions and raids of offices and apartments was preceded by recent arrests of media manager Andrei

Aliaksandrau, member of Viasna human rights defender Leanid Sudalenka and their colleagues, toughening of criminal charges against the coordinator of Viasna's volunteer programme Marfa Rabkova, and a smear campaign in the state-controlled media, picturing human rights NGOs as "terrorists". All these actions by the authorities are clearly aimed at punishing human rights defenders and independent journalists for their peaceful and legitimate work, intimidating them, and paralysing their activities. The magnitude of the attack on civil society and independent media in Belarus is unprecedented throughout all of the OSCE region.

CSP members express their solidarity with all the colleagues in Belarus, including member organisations of the CSP – Human Rights Centre "Viasna" and the Belarusian Association of Journalists – and demand that the authorities of Belarus reverse this negative trend and bring their policies and practices in compliance with their OSCE commitments and their obligations as a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The authorities must immediately cease the attack against Belarusian human rights defenders, journalists, civic activists and their organisations. The charges against them must be dropped, detained activists must be released, and confiscated equipment must be returned to the respective owners. Belarusian authorities must guarantee the rights of human rights defenders, civic activists and journalists and not criminalize their legitimate work.

CSP members call on international organisations and institutions, including the OSCE, the EU, the UN and its member and participating States to immediately and publicly condemn the unprecedented persecution of Belarusian human rights defenders, civic activists and journalists, as well as to take relevant and effective steps that underline the unacceptability of the Belarusian government's repressive policies. The international community has earlier recognised the important work of "Viasna" and the Belarusian Association

of Journalists with prestigious awards. Now it is the time to protect them and other Belarusian human rights defenders and journalists from brutal repression by the government. The massive scale of persecution requires a swift, coordinated, and multilateral response.

List of organisations supporting the statement:

1. Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor, Armenia
2. Human Rights Monitoring Institute, Lithuania
3. Center for Participation and Development, Georgia
4. ARTICLE 19, United Kingdom
5. International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR), Belgium
6. Legal Policy Research Centre, Kazakhstan
7. DRA Berlin, Germany
8. Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Bulgaria
9. The Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House, Belarus/Lithuania
10. KRF Public Alternative, Ukraine
11. The International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCTO), International NGO
12. The Swedish OSCE-network, Sweden
13. Public Association "Dignity", Kazakhstan
14. Human Rights Group "Citizen.Army.Law", Russia
15. Human Rights House Zagreb, Croatia
16. Swiss Helsinki Committee, Switzerland
17. Public Verdict Foundation, Russia
18. Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights, Russia
19. Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Norway
20. Social Action Centre NGO, Ukraine
21. Netherlands Helsinki Committee, Netherlands
22. Truth Hounds, Ukraine
23. Macedonian Helsinki Committee, Republic of North Macedonia

24. Association UMDPL, Ukraine
25. The Human Rights Center (HRC), Georgia
26. The Georgian Centre for Psychosocial and Medical Rehabilitation of Torture Victims – GCRT, Georgia
27. Human Rights in Mental Health – Federation Global Initiative on Psychiatry, Netherlands
28. The Hungarian Helsinki Committee, Hungary
29. Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Poland
30. Human Rights Center ZMINA, Ukraine
31. World Organisation against Torture (OMCT), Belgium/Switzerland
32. Committee against Torture, Russia
33. Human Rights House Foundation, international NGO (head office in Norway)
34. People in Need, Czech Republic
35. Human Rights Club, Azerbaijan
36. Freedom Files, Poland
37. Women of the Don, Russia
38. Freedom Now, USA
39. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), Germany
40. Index on Censorship, United Kingdom
41. Center for Civil Liberties, Ukraine
42. Crude Accountability, USA
43. Moscow Helsinki Group, Russia
44. Libereco Partnership for Human Rights, Germany/Switzerland
45. Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law, Kazakhstan
46. Promo LEX, Moldova
47. Bir Duino Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyzstan