

Belarus: Civic solidarity movement condemns mass detentions and police violence against peaceful demonstrators, calls for a strong reaction by the international community

Statement by members of the Civic Solidarity Platform

We, the undersigned members of the Civic Solidarity Platform (CSP), a coalition of human rights NGOs from Europe, the former Soviet Union region and North America, and other non-governmental organisations decry the mass detentions of peaceful demonstrators, journalists and human rights defenders, as well as the use of violence and abusive treatment targeting them in Belarus on 25-26 March 2017. These events were the culmination of a series of repressive measures taken by the authorities of the country since the beginning of March to stifle the public expression of grievances. Given the severity of this human rights crisis of unprecedented scale since December 2010, it is crucial that the international community takes resolute action to push for an end to the crackdown in Belarus and justice for those targeted by it.

We condemn the gross violations of the right to peaceful assembly, freedom of expression, freedom from arbitrary detention, and the right to fair trial in Belarus in connection with the recent peaceful protests, and call on the international community to use all available means to put pressure on the Belarusian authorities to immediately end

these violations.

Such measures by the authorities should include:

- immediately releasing those currently behind bars because of their involvement in the peaceful protests or their efforts to monitor them;
- dropping charges against all those prosecuted on these grounds;
- carrying out prompt, thorough and impartial investigations into all allegations of arbitrary detention, ill-treatment and other violations of the rights of protesters, passers-by, journalists, human rights defenders and political activists in connection with the protests; and
- bringing those responsible for violations to justice.

We call in particular for the following concrete actions by international community in response to the current crackdown in Belarus:

To the OSCE:

- The OSCE participating States should initiate and support the renewal of the Moscow Mechanism in relation to Belarus and the appointment of a new rapporteur for this process, in view of the fact that the current developments mirror those on the grounds of which this mechanism was invoked in 2011;
- The OSCE Chairmanship should appoint a Special Representative on Belarus, whose mandate should include investigating the recent violations;
- The Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights should monitor the trials of those facing charges because of their participation in the recent peaceful protests, or their efforts to monitor and report on them;
- The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly should reconsider

holding its annual session in Minsk in July 2017 and identify another host country and city for this event.

To the Council of Europe:

- The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe should replace its current rapporteur on the situation in Belarus, ensuring that the individual holding this position forcefully speaks out against human rights violations in the country.

To the UN:

- Members of the Human Rights Council should extend the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus, continue urging the Belarusian authorities to allow the Special Rapporteur to visit the country, and adopt a strong resolution on the human rights situation in Belarus at the next session of the Council;
- High Commissioner on Human Rights should publicly condemn the crackdown in Belarus and engage in direct contact with the Belarusian authorities on this matter.

To international financial institutions:

- International financial institutions should apply strong human rights conditionality in the implementation of their programs in Belarus and refrain from allocating funding to government projects until the human rights situation in the country has substantially improved. Specifically, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development should reinstate its calibrated strategy on Belarus.

To the EU:

- The EU member states and institutions should apply stronger and more consistent human rights conditionality to the development of its relations with Belarus and

consider the prospects of reinstating sanctions similar to those applied in 2011-12 for widespread human rights violations.

To the USA:

- The US government should consider reinstating the sanctions against Belarus that it suspended in 2015-16.

Background information, based on reports from the ground:

In the afternoon of 25 March 2017, people took to the streets in the Belarusian capital of Minsk for planned peaceful protests on the occasion of the Day of Freedom, which commemorates the Belarusian declaration of independence in 1918. There was as a heavy police and security presence in the city, the downtown area where protests were due to be held was cordoned off, and traffic was blocked on the main Independence Avenue. Local and international human rights monitors representing the CSP member organisations documented the use of heavy-handed tactics by the law enforcement and security authorities to prevent the peaceful protests, for which authorities had not given advance permission as required by Belarusian law and in violation of international standards. At least 700 people were detained on 25 March, including elderly and passers-by. As can be seen on available [photos](#) and [footage](#), police forcefully rounded up and beat protesters with batons, although these made no resistance. More than 30 journalists and photographers from both Belarusian and international media outlets were detained; cameras and other equipment of some of them were damaged by police. Toward the evening, police started releasing detainees from the detention facilities, in many cases without charge. However, others remain in detention, and dozens of individuals are expected to stand trial starting Monday 27 March on charges relating to their participation in the peaceful protests.

The following episode requires particular attention: At 12.45

pm local time on 25 March, about an hour before the start of the planned peaceful protest, anti-riot police raided the offices of the Human Rights Center Viasna and detained a total of 57 Belarusian and foreign human rights defenders and volunteers as well as journalists. Human rights defenders and volunteers had gathered there for a training on monitoring the protests and were planning to go to the streets of Minsk for observation of the assemblies. Among them were representatives of Viasna, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, the Belarusian Documentation Center, Frontline Defenders, International Partnership for Human Rights and other organisations. The police shouted at all present, intimidated them, and ordered to lie down on the floor face down. 57 people were detained without any charges, packed in the buses and brought to the Pervomaisky district police station, where their belongings were searched and their personal information recorded. The detainees were held there for two and a half hours and were released afterwards without charges. One of the detained needed medical treatment because of injuries sustained when being beaten by police. The raid of the offices of Viasna and the detention of the monitors were clearly aimed at intimidating and preventing them from observing the peaceful assembly and documenting possible violations.

The crackdown continued on 26 March, with dozens of people being detained by police as they gathered at October Square in Minsk at noon to express solidarity with those detained the day before. Among the detained on 26 March were at least one human rights defender, one civil society activist and one journalist. Representatives of national and international human rights NGOs, including members of the CSP, continue to document violations perpetrated in connection with the events of the last few days.

The detentions on 25-26 March followed the earlier detention of about 300 people, including opposition members, journalists and human rights defenders in the last few weeks. These

detentions have taken place against the background of a wave of peaceful demonstrations that were carried out across Belarus since mid-February 2017 to protest against so-called “social parasites” law which imposes a special tax on those who have worked for less than six months during the year without registering as unemployed. The legislation, which has affected hundreds of thousands of people in the economically struggling country, has caused widespread dismay. On 9 March, President Lukashenko suspended the implementation of the law but refused to withdraw it, resulting in further protests. Many of those detained have been fined or arrested for up to 15 days on administrative charges related to their participation in the peaceful protests. Over two dozen people are facing criminal charges on trumped-up charges of preparation to mass riots.

Signed by the following CSP members:

1. Analytical Center for Inter-Ethnic Cooperation and Consultations (Georgia)
2. Article 19 (United Kingdom)
3. Association UMDPL (Ukraine)
4. Bir Duino (Kyrgyzstan)
5. Bulgarian Helsinki Committee
6. Center for Civil Liberties (Ukraine)
7. Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights (Russia)
8. Committee against Torture (Russia)
9. Crude Accountability (USA)
10. Freedom Files (Russia/Poland)
11. German-Russian Exchange – DRA (Germany)
12. Helsinki Association of Armenia
13. Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly – Vanadzor (Armenia)
14. Helsinki Committee of Armenia
15. Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia
16. Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (Poland)
17. Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan

18. Human Rights First (USA)
19. Human Rights House Foundation (Norway)
20. Human Rights Information Center (Ukraine)
21. Human Rights Monitoring Institute (Lithuania)
22. The institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (Azerbaijan/Georgia/Switzerland)
23. Index on Censorship (United Kingdom)
24. Institute Respublica (Ukraine)
25. International Partnership for Human Rights (Belgium)
26. Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law
27. The Kosova Rehabilitation Center for Torture Victims
28. Macedonian Helsinki Committee
29. Moscow Helsinki Group (Russia)
30. The Netherlands Helsinki Committee
31. Norwegian Helsinki Committee
32. Office of Civil Freedoms (Tajikistan)
33. Promo-LEX (Moldova)
34. Protection of Rights without Borders (Armenia)
35. Public Association „Dignity” (Kazakhstan)
36. Public Alternative Foundation (Ukraine)
37. Public Foundation Golos Svobody (Kyrgyzstan)
38. Public Verdict Foundation (Russia)
39. Regional Center for Strategic Studies (Azerbaijan/Georgia)
40. Serbian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights
41. SOLIDARUS e.V. (Germany)
42. The Swiss Helsinki Committee
43. Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union
44. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
45. World Organisation against Torture (OMCT)

Other organisations who have joined the statement:

46. Belarus Free Theatre
47. Libereco – Partnership for Human Rights (Switzerland)
48. PEN International

More signatures are being added.