

24 March 2017

### **Belarus: Human rights defender Oleg Volchek imprisoned**

On 21 March 2017, the Frunzensky District Court of Minsk city found the human rights defender **Oleg Volchek** guilty of participating in an unauthorized peaceful assembly. He was sentenced to thirteen days' imprisonment.

[Oleg Volchek](#) is a human rights defender and Head of the human rights centre, **Legal Assistance to the Population**, which provides free legal assistance to citizens on matters of labour and housing, as well as civil and political rights. Despite the centre being arbitrarily banned by the authorities in 2003, it continues its work. In 1999, Oleg Volchek was in charge of an independent committee which investigated the forced disappearance of the former Belarusian Minister of Internal Affairs and one of the leading opposition politicians, Mr Yuri Zakharenko.

On 21 March 2017, the Frunzensky District Court of Minsk city considered an indictment from the Department of Security, Public Order and Precaution against Oleg Volchek. The human rights defender was accused of violating Article 23.34 Part 1 of the Code of Administrative Offences (participating in unauthorized peaceful assembly) in reprisal for his monitoring activities during the assembly on 17 February 2017. During this assembly, more than five thousand people gathered on the streets of Minsk against the Presidential Decree No. 3 "On prevention of social dependency". Oleg Volchek actively provided legal advice on appealing this decree during the assembly.

The Frunzensky District Court delivered a guilty verdict despite the fact that the investigation into the administrative case against the human rights defender violated Article 2.10 of the Code of Execution Procedure on Administrative Violations (thorough, exhaustive and objective investigation of circumstances of a case). Oleg Volchek filed a complaint against this violation before the Moskvavsky District Prosecutor's Office in Minsk. Oleg Volchek was sentenced to thirteen days' imprisonment.

Over the course of three months, Oleg Volchek and his colleagues from Legal Assistance to the Population, provided more than 1000 free legal consultations concerning Decree No. 3 to people who were labelled "social parasites" and ordered to pay the fee. In December 2016, Legal Assistance to the Population called for the Presidential Administration and the Prime Minister of Belarus to impose a moratorium on Decree No. 3, as it has provoked mass protests.

On [17 March 2017](#), human rights lawyers [Leonid Sudalenko](#) and [Anatoly Poplavnyi](#) were found guilty of non-compliance with the legal requirements on the organisation and conducting of mass events, which was also in relation to a peaceful demonstration against Decree No. 3. Since the beginning of February 2017, thousands of people have protested peacefully in many cities of Belarus against the decree which is in violation of the Constitution and International Human Rights Law, as it sanctions people who have worked less than 183 days per year by imposing a penalty in the form of a fee and/or administrative arrest. The demonstrations were not authorised by the Belarusian authorities, who use different pretexts to restrict the right of peaceful assembly. More than 300 people were detained by the police following these peaceful demonstrations. Those detained include human rights defenders, journalists, and civil and political activists throughout the country.

Front Line Defenders expresses its concern at the charges against human rights defender Oleg Volchek, as it believes they are linked to his legitimate and peaceful human rights work in Belarus.

**Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Belarus to:**

1. Immediately and unconditionally drop all charges against Oleg Volchek, as it is believed that they are solely motivated by his legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
2. Take all necessary measures to ensure the immediate and unconditional release of Oleg Volchek and to guarantee his physical and psychological security;
3. Immediately drop all charges against Leonid Sudalenko and Anatoly Poplavnyi as it is believed that they are solely motivated by their legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Belarus are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.