

5 February 2021

## **Belarus: Members of the Office for the Rights of People with Disabilities face judicial harassment**

On 3 February 2021, human rights defenders and members of the Office for the Rights of People with Disabilities **Siarhei Drazdouski** and **Aleh Hrableuski** were detained and interrogated by the Investigative Committee. After the interrogation Aleh Hrableuski was detained for three days and Siarhei Drazdouski was placed under house arrest.

**Siarhei Drazdouski** is a founder and director of the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Since 2006 he has worked in the Belarusian Society of Disabled People. In 1997 he was among the founders of the Association of Wheelchair Users and in 2001 became the Head of the Association. Siarhei Drazdouski has also acted as an expert for the Council of Europe and UN programmes.

**Aleh Hrableuski** is a human rights defender and lawyer at the free legal office of the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. For more than 20 years Aleh Hrableuski has been engaged with civil society organisations, provided legal support to the Society for Protection of Consumer Rights, independent trade unions and human rights organisations, including the Centre for Legal Transformation (Lawtrend). **The Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** is a prominent and leading Belarusian human rights organisation that works for persons with disabilities. The organisation provides legal assistance and facilitates consultations on the rights of people with disabilities, advocates for changes in legislation, conducts research and educational activities to enable citizens to learn more about people with disabilities in Belarus. With its enormous work, The Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has contributed to Belarus' decision to join the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

On 3 February, Siarhei Drazdouski and Aleh Hrableuski were detained and taken for questioning by the Investigative Committee. After interrogation Aleh Hrableuski was detained for three days at the Okrestina Street detention facility in Minsk. Siarhei Drazdouski was placed under house arrest and deprived of any communication except contacts with his lawyer. The human rights defenders have reported that suspected fraud is the alleged reason for the detention of Aleh Hrableuski, whereas the accusation against Siarhei Drazdouski remains unknown. At present, the lawyers of the human rights defenders are restricted from providing further information by a nondisclosure agreement. In a Facebook post, Siarhei Drazdouski shared that the pressure against him and his colleague is connected to the organisation's work in assisting people to find lawyers and to acquire legal assistance, including people accused under Article 23.34 of the Code of Administrative Offences (violating the procedure for organising and holding a protest).

On 1 February, the Department for Financial Investigations called the two human rights defenders to invite them to visit the department's office next day to collect some of their confiscated office equipment. On 2 February, Aleh Hrableuski and Siarhei Drazdouski, accompanied by their lawyers, went to the Department for Financial Investigations, but their lawyers were not allowed in. Aleh Hrableuski and Siarhei Drazdouski were then interrogated for seven hours. During the interrogation the human rights defenders were humiliated, threatened and insulted. Aleh Hrableuski was stripped naked and threatened with reprisals. The human rights defenders were deprived of the possibility for proper movement during the seven hour interrogation.

On 21 January, the Department for Financial Investigations office published a [message](#) on its official website launching a process of verification into the activities of the members of the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as a part of the investigation in “possible inappropriate acquisition of funds received in the form of charitable contributions and international support in the period from 2020 to the present for the purpose of providing assistance to Belarusian citizens with disabilities”. The same day the Department for Financial Investigations carried out three separate searches at the office of the organisation, the home of Siarhei Drazdouski and home of organisation’s accountant **Tatiana Krishtal**. During the searches, the law enforcement officers confiscated phones, office equipment and documents.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the detention of Aleh Hrableuski and the house arrest imposed on Siarhei Drazdouski as well as their ill-treatment during interrogation, as it believes that they are being targeted solely as a result of their work in promoting and protecting human rights in Belarus. The judicial harassment against Oleg Grablesky and Siarhei Drazdouski follows a [number](#) of acts of reprisal against and judicial harassment of human rights defenders from the law enforcement representatives in Belarus since the results of the 2020 Presidential elections were announced on 9 August 2020. Front Line Defenders expresses concern that these actions may have a chilling effect on the promotion and protection of human rights in the Belarus, and may be threaten the creation of a safe and enabling environment in which defenders can carry out their work.

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

1. Take all necessary measures to ensure the unconditional release of Aleh Hrableuski and Siarhei Drazdouski as it is believed that the charges are solely motivated by their legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
2. Immediately stop the judicial harassment of Aleh Hrableuski and Siarhei Drazdouski and pressure against them and other members of the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;
3. Stop the practice of detentions and judicial prosecution against human rights defenders in Belarus;
4. Take measures to ensure that government officials or other public figures refrain from making statements or declaration stigmatising the legitimate work of human rights defenders;