

14 July 2021

Statement – Belarus: Crackdown on human rights defenders and organisations

On 14 July 2021, law enforcement officers in Belarus organized a massive raid against human rights organizations and other NGOs, human rights defenders and activists. More than 19 offices of NGOs were searched, including the offices of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, Legal Transformation Center (Lawtrend), the Centre for Information and Legal Support of Socially Vulnerable Groups "Advocacy", the International Public Association "Gender Perspectives", the Belarusian Association of Journalists, and [Human Rights Centre 'Viasna' \(HRC 'Viasna'\)](#).

On 14 July 2021, law enforcement officers searched the office of HRC 'Viasna' in Minsk as well as the apartments of members of the organisation: lawyer Uladzimir Labkovich; board member Valiantsin Stefanovich; woman human rights defender Alena Laptionak; coordinator of the 'Human Rights Defenders Against Death Penalty' campaign Andrei Paluda; human rights defender in Hrodna Viktor Sazonau; human rights defender in Barysau Aleh Mackevich, and; Chairman of HRC 'Viasna' Ales Bialiatski. Uladzimir Labkovich, Valiantsin Stefanovich, Andrei Paluda and Yauheniya Babajeva were detained for 72 hours in a criminal case led by the Central Office of the Investigative Committee of Belarus, whereas Ales Bialiatski remains detained at the Central Office of the Investigative Committee of Belarus. Alena Laptionak and Viktor Sazonau were also detained. In Orsha, law enforcement officers detained editor of the local news portal orsha.eu, and human rights defender Ihar Kazmerchak. For now, the circumstances of the detention remain unknown, including the status of many of the human rights defenders.

Journalist and human rights defender Siarhei Sys was detained in Minsk and his house was also searched. The police officers also raided the houses of human rights defender and member of human rights organisation Human Constanta in Brest, Kiryl Kafanau, leader of Polatsk branch of the independent labor union, Mikola Sharach and woman human rights defender Yauheniya Babajeva. The office of Lawtrend and the apartment of the organisation's director Volha Smalianka were also searched. Volha Smalianka was released later the same day.

These are not isolated incidences, as law enforcement officers have previously organised similar massive raids against human rights defenders, independent media outlets and human rights organisations. On 16 February 2021, the police raided and searched the office of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the office of the independent Belarusian Radio, Electronic Industry Workers' Union REP and the two Minsk offices of HRC 'Viasna', as well as their office in Mahiliou. The authorities also conducted searches at the homes or offices of more than 40 human rights defenders, journalists and their relatives in Mahiliou, Brest, Viciebsk, Homiel, Mazyr, Rechyca and Baranavichy, among other cities. There were reports of excessive use of force used by authorities against individuals, while authorities also seized phones, computers, money, credit cards and even children's digital tablets and money. According to the data collected by the Belarusian Association of Journalists, since 9 August 2020, 480 journalists have been detained in Belarus and 29 of them are still in jail.

Members of HRC 'Viasna' have been under pressure since early May 2020. Members were arbitrarily detained, subjected to judicial harassment and arrested for their active human rights work. In March 2021, the Main Department for Investigation of Crimes in the Sphere of Organized Crime and Corruption of the Central Office of the Investigative Committee of the

Republic of Belarus reportedly investigated the activities of the HRC 'Viasna' under Art. 342 of the Criminal Code (organization and active participation in group actions that grossly violate public order). At the moment, the case is under active investigation, including searches of the organisation's local offices and the apartments of HRC 'Viasna' members, interrogations of activists and other procedural actions. Four members and volunteers of the organisation are currently in jail: [Maria Rabkova](#), Andrey Chapyuk, [Leaid Sudalenka](#) and Taciana Lasica.

Many independent media outlets and journalists are also facing judicial prosecution. On 18 May, the Department of Financial Investigations of Belarus raided the country's largest independent media outlets, TUT.by, arresting 15 of its employees for finding "materials affecting the interests of the Republic of Belarus". On 8 July 2021, human rights defender Ihar Kazmerchak's house was searched and he was detained, however, he was released from detention three days later. On 8 and 9 July 2021, around 40 searches were conducted in the offices of 12 independent media outlets and in the homes of journalists. At least 15 journalists were detained and interrogated, and 4 were arrested under the criminal charges of terrorism. Journalists from Nasha Niva have been arrested under Article 342 of the Criminal Code (organization or preparation of actions that grossly violate public order or participation in them) and Article 293 of the Criminal Code (mass riots). The websites of Nasha Niva, euroradio.fm and TUT.by have been shut down.

Front Line Defenders is seriously concerned by the detention, searches and ongoing judicial prosecution of human rights organisations and human rights defenders in Belarus, and believes that they are being targeted solely as a result of their legitimate and peaceful human rights work. Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Belarus to immediately release detained human rights defenders, drop the charges against them, and cease targeting human rights defenders and human rights organisations in the country. Since the results of the 2020 Presidential elections were announced on 9 August 2020, there has been a significant increase in the incidents of judicial harassment and acts of reprisal against human rights defenders and journalists from law enforcement officials in the country.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Belarus to:

1. Immediately clarify the location of the detained human rights defenders whose whereabouts are still unknown, and ensure that all detained human rights defenders have access to a lawyer;
2. Take all necessary measures to ensure the immediate and unconditional release of all detained human rights defenders, and guarantee their physical and psychological security and integrity;
3. Cease the practice of detentions and judicial prosecution of journalists covering the protests in Belarus and human rights defenders reporting about human rights violations and providing legal support in Belarus;
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.