

## **Demand for the immediate release of Siarhei Drazdouski and Aleh Hrableuski, human rights defenders from the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.**

On 3 February, it was revealed that representatives of the human rights and educational institution, the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Siarhei Drazdouski, director, and Aleh Hrableuski, the office's legal counsellor, had been detained.

For 10 years the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has been providing free legal assistance, advocating for changes in legislation, and conducting educational activities to change attitudes towards people with disabilities. Belarus has joined the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in particular, thanks to their extensive work.

Currently, Hrableuski is a suspect in a criminal case and is placed in a temporary detention facility for 72 hours. Drazdouski, who is also a suspect, has been placed under house arrest, with a ban on the use of communications tools. Their lawyers have signed a nondisclosure agreement. Accordingly, there is no information about the circumstances of the case, their arrest and detention. It is also possible that there will be no access to information about bringing charges against them or changing the measure of restraint.

On the eve of the detention, representatives of the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities were again recalled (after questioning on 21 January) to the Financial Investigations Department of the State Control Committee, where, according to their statement, they were subjected to cruel and degrading treatment for seven hours. The details of their inhumane treatment were made public by the Office's representatives after they had been released from the Financial Investigations Department on 2 February.

According to the Financial Investigations Department, the Office's officials are suspected with the possible illegal use of funds, obtained by it in the form of donations and international aid for the purpose of providing legal assistance to the citizens of Belarus with disabilities.

This is not the first case of the persecution of Belarusian human rights defenders. Since August 2020, for their legitimate human rights activities, the following people have been imprisoned: Marfa Rabkova, the coordinator of the Volunteer Service of the Human Rights Center Viasna; Andrei Chepyuk, a volunteer at Viasna; Leanid Sudalenka and Tatsiana Lasitsa, representatives of the Gomel branch of Viasna. Many human rights defenders have also been subjected to administrative harassment.

Confirming the position stated in the [Statement of the Belarusian civil society organisations](#), we note the following: unprecedented pressure on civil society organisations for their professional activities in the field of human rights protection continues.

These actions grossly violate a number of international agreements and documents to which the Republic of Belarus is a party, in particular: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the Declaration on the Rights and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms;

the Guiding Principles of OSCE on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders; and Guidelines on Freedom of Association.

According to the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (Art. 1), “Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels.”

For the purposes of encouraging and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms by peaceful means, everyone has the right to demand, receive, and use respective resources, individually or in association with others.

At the same time, the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders provides that the state takes all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the relevant authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, *de facto* or *de jure*, adverse discrimination, pressure, or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the Declaration.

Therefore, persecuting human rights defenders for their lawful activities, which includes provision of legal advice and ensuring civil society organisations’ access to necessary resources, is absolutely unacceptable.

Therefore, we consider the persecution of Aleh Hrabieuski and Siarhei Drazdouski to be politically motivated and aimed at ending their public and peaceful activities that seek to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms. We consider Hrabieuski and Drazdouski to be prisoners of conscience under Art. 3.1(b) of the [Guidelines on defining ‘political prisoners’](#).

Given the aforementioned, we, the representatives of Belarusian human rights organisations, request that:

1. Human rights defenders representing the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Aleh Hrabieuski and Siarhei Drazdouski, are immediately released, and their criminal persecution is stopped.
2. The criminal prosecution of Belarusian human rights defenders and civil society activists, related to their lawful activities aimed at, *inter alia*, providing legal and humanitarian aid to the victims of human rights violations, is stopped; all political prisoners are released; and all political repression is stopped.
3. The interference in the activities of civil society organisations, arbitrary and intrusive use of inspections and other control instruments, the use of forceful methods when conducting inspections, and the deprivation of the right to access financial resources are all stopped.
4. All the obligations undertaken to ensure the guarantee of human rights activities are implemented.

*Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs*

*Human Rights Center "Viasna"*

*Belarusian Documentation Center*

*Belarusian Helsinki Committee*

*Belarusian Association of Journalists*

*Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House*

*Legal Transformation Center “Lawtrend”*

*Advisory center on contemporary international practices and their legal implementation “Human Constanta”*

*Belarusian PEN Center*

*FORB Initiative*

*Legal Initiative*

*Initiative Group “Identity and Law”*