

Statement on the unprecedented attack on Belarusian human rights defenders

On February 16, a wave of searches of human rights defenders took place throughout Belarus. The searches were carried out at the office of the Public Association "Belarusian Association of Journalists", at the apartments of chairman of the organization Andrei Bastunets, vice-chairmen – Barys Haretski and Aleh Aheyau, as well as a lawyer – Kristina Richter; searches were also held at the offices of the Human Rights Center "Viasna", the apartments of coordinator of the campaign "Human Rights Defenders against the Death Penalty in Belarus", Viasna's human rights defender Andrei Paluda, leaders and activists of the Independent Trade Union of Radioelectronic Industry, as well as regional human rights defenders.

Subsequently, the official Telegram channel of the Investigative Committee published a report according to which "a criminal investigation under article 342 (organization and preparation of acts seriously disturbing public order or active participation in them) of the Criminal Code of Belarus is underway. As part of the preliminary investigation to determine the circumstances of the financing of the protest activities, searches have been initiated in organizations that identify themselves as human rights groups. Officials of the General Directorate for Combating Organized Crime and Corruption of the Ministry of Internal Affairs are authorized by the Prosecutor General's Office to conduct the proceedings. A final legal assessment of the situation will be made after the entire set of proceedings".

Earlier, searches were carried out at the office of another Belarusian human rights organization, the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Later, the director of the organization, Siarhei Drazdouski, and the lawyer, Aleh Hrabieuski, were detained. They are currently under house arrest and detention, respectively. In addition, four more human rights defenders, members of the Human Rights Center "Viasna", Marfa Rabkova, Andrei Chapiuk, Leanid Sudalenka and Tatsiana Lasitsa, were also detained for carrying out human rights activities.

Assistance to victims of reprisals is increasingly becoming a reason for criminal proceedings against Belarusians defending human rights.

Reaffirming the position expressed in the Statement of Belarusian civil society organizations, as well as in the Joint Statement of Belarusian human rights organizations on the detention of representatives of the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, we declare that unprecedented pressure continues to be exerted for professional activities in the field of human rights protection.

These acts flagrantly violate international standards relating to the protection of human rights defenders, in particular, the provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals,

Groups, and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Declaration on Human Rights Defenders), the OSCE Guidelines for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, and the Guiding Principles on Freedom of Association.

Thus, according to Article 1 of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, “everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels”.

For the purpose of promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms by peaceful means, everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to seek, receive and utilize appropriate resources, to offer and provide professional and qualified legal assistance or other appropriate advice and assistance in the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

At the same time, the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders provides that the State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent 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, persecution or pressure for legitimate human rights activities, free legal assistance to citizens, as well as access to resources by civil society organizations is totally unacceptable.

In this regard, we, representatives of civil society organizations of Belarus, urgently demand:

- 1) to cease persecution and pressure on human rights defenders and civil society activists for their legitimate activities, including legal, charitable, and other assistance to the victims of human rights violations;
- 2) to stop interfering in legitimate human rights activities, inciting negative public attitudes towards human rights organizations and discrediting their activities;
- 3) to take all necessary measures to fulfill the commitments to guarantee the exercise of human rights activities;
- 4) to put an end to the obstruction of both the right of civil society organizations to access financing and the access of Belarusian citizens to charitable and legal assistance;
- 5) to immediately release all political prisoners and put an end to political repressions.

We call upon international organizations and institutions to publicly express their assessment of the persecution of Belarusian human rights defenders and civic activists and to use all possible means to influence the situation.

Belarusian civil society organizations:

Legal Transformation Center (Lawtrend)

Belarusian Helsinki Committee

Human Constanta

Belarusian Documentation Centre

FORB Initiative

PEN Belarus

Assembly of Non-Governmental Democratic Organizations of Belarus

The Legal Initiative

The initiative group of the GrSU im. I. Kupala

Belarusian Students' Association

Educational center "POST"

The Local cultural and educational foundation "Shchorsy and Khreptovichy"

The School of Young Managers in Public Administration

Belarusian National Youth Council "RADA"

Center for Social Innovation

Lev Sapega Foundation

Initiative "March, baby!"

Human Rights Movement "Our Belarus"

Civic Tech

Strike Committee of BSUPC

International public association of ecologists

Slonim City Organization of the Public Association "BPF-Adradzhennie"

Center for Urban Life (Grodno)

Movement "For Freedom"

Institution "Space of success" and others.