

Belarus authorities should immediately and unconditionally release woman human rights defender Nasta Loika

Joint statement by international and belarusian human rights organisations

On June 20, 2023, the Minsk City Court sentenced the woman human rights defender Nasta (Anastasia) Loika to seven years in general security prison. The trial was closed to the public, and the details of the court hearings are unknown. Alyona Shilko, the judge of the Minsk City Court, found her guilty of “incitement of racial, national, religious or other social enmity or discord” (Article 130, Part 3 of the Belarusian Criminal Code). These accusations are based on the contribution Loika made in 2018 to a report that assessed human rights violations by law enforcement officers during state-sponsored persecution of the anarchist community in Belarus. The judicial process was rushed, the sentence was announced during the third court hearing over eight days.

Nasta Loika is a prominent Belarusian woman human rights defender working in the field of human rights education. She also analyzes repressive “anti-extremist” laws, and advocates for the protection of the rights of migrants and stateless people in Belarus. In the summer of 2021, Belarusian authorities shut down Human Constanta, the organization where she previously worked, as part of an orchestrated attack against civil society in the country. Human Constanta promoted public interests and joint actions in response to current human rights challenges in Belarus. In 2022, the Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House named Nasta Loika the human rights defender of the year.

Nasta Loika was arrested on October 28, 2022 and has been arbitrarily detained ever since. On October 31, 2022, the Pieršamajski District Court in Minsk sentenced her to 15 days of administrative arrest under bogus “petty hooliganism” charges (under Article 19.1 of the Code of Administrative Offences). The authorities then extended her detention three times.

During the 58 days of administrative arrest the authorities tortured Nasta, treated her inhumanely, and denied her the right to receive medication and warm clothes, and access legal help. Her mother’s house was raided in November 2022.

On December 24, 2022, Belarusian law enforcement officials transferred Nasta Loika to Pre-trial Detention Center No.1 in Minsk. At first, the prosecutor accused her of violating Criminal Code Articles 130 Part 3 “incitement of racial, national, religious or other social enmity or discord” and also Article 342.1, “organizing of group activities that gravely violate public order.” Ultimately, the prosecutor dropped the second charge.

The Belarus authorities also targeted human rights lawyers, who acted as Nasta Loika’s defense attorneys. In November 2022, Tatsiana Lishankova was detained and subsequently lost her license to practice law. In March 2023, the Qualification Commission under the Justice Ministry refused to pass the qualification examination of another one of her defense lawyers, Inessa Olenskaya, which will lead to her eventual disbarment.

The undersigned human rights organizations consider this targeting of human rights lawyers working on Nasta Loika’s defense a flagrant violation of the human rights defender’s right to defense, as well as a violation of the lawyers’ right to exercise their profession.

The police first detained Loika on September 6, 2022 near the Minsk City Court, when she arrived to show support for two human rights defenders – Maria Rabkova, who was sentenced that day to 15 years in prison, and Andrey Chapiuk. She was temporarily released on October 5, 2022, only to be detained again on October 28.

The undersigned organizations condemn the arrest and verdict against Nasta Loika. We believe Belarusian authorities are targeting her for her peaceful and legitimate human rights work. We condemn the physical and psychological torture Loika was subjected to during her time in administrative arrest and in pre-trial detention. Her sentencing reflects the systemic aggravated attacks against Belarus's human rights defenders and civil society by Belarusian authorities. We call for the immediate and unconditional release of human rights defender Nasta Loika.

Signatories:

ARTICLE 19 Europe

Netherlands Helsinki Committee

The Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House

Belarusian Helsinki Committee

Belarusian Association of Journalists

International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

Front Line Defenders

Human Constanta

Human Rights Centre Viasna

Human Rights Watch

Lawtrend

Legal Initiative (Belarus)

Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

REDRESS

World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

PEN Belarus