STATEMENT OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS COALITION

ON THE ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION WITH REPRESSION IN BELARUS

We welcome the release by the Belarusian authorities of people persecuted on politically motivated grounds, including releases secured through the efforts of the United States and other countries. Since the beginning of the mass releases known to us on 3 July 2024, approximately 900 people have been released.

At the same time, in view of the ongoing releases, public debate about the situation with repression in Belarus, including debate prompted by these releases, and the positions of migration authorities in several countries stating that the situation has improved, we, a coalition of Belarusian human rights organisations, wish to state the following:

Over the six years of repressive policies pursued in Belarus since 2020, a coordinated system for suppressing dissent has been established and maintained at the state level, involving law enforcement agencies, the courts, the penitentiary system and other state bodies. Changes to the legal system introduced after 2020 have resulted in the formal discrimination of people whom the state considers dissenters being enshrined in legislation. Such people are deprived of rights in many areas **extending far beyond criminal or administrative prosecution**. They are not only denied civil and political rights but are also prevented from participating fully in social, economic and cultural life. Repression is widespread in education, employment (see the statement issued by the human rights coalition on 25 May 2026) and culture. A vast number of people living in Belarus are subjected to unlawful administrative practices in their daily lives, creating an atmosphere of constant surveillance and fear.

At the same time, over the past six years, repression has become significantly more latent in nature. This is due both to the deliberate concealment of information and evidence of repressive practices (see the Viasna Human Rights Centre report Hidden Repression in Belarus 2020–2026) and to the spread of forms of pressure that are less visible in themselves and are not always recognised as repression.

The authorities are also becoming increasingly indiscriminate in their choice of methods. This leads to what may be termed “collateral repression”: measures and instruments are used to exert pressure on a much wider group of people than the stated target. Examples include the designation of the European Humanities University as an “extremist organisation”, the designation of chats used by prisoners’ relatives as “extremist formations”, and the so-called “passport decree”.

The authorities are continuously expanding the transnational dimension of repression in order to exert pressure on people outside the country, including through criminal prosecution in absentia, restrictions related to identity and travel documents, and pressure on relatives who remain in Belarus.

Repressive policies target not only individuals but also independent public institutions. The mass liquidation of civil society organisations and political parties, pressure on independent media, the criminalisation of activities carried out by unregistered associations, and the application of legislation

on countering extremism have become independent instruments for suppressing independent civic activity and significantly reducing its organisational and informational infrastructure.

As a result, **the broad range of people affected by repression, combined with the increasingly latent nature of repressive practices, makes it significantly more difficult to obtain information and monitor the authorities' repressive actions.**

We can speak of changes in the forms of repression, but the available data do not indicate any decline in its intensity. New criminal cases continue to be opened, convictions handed down and people detained. Repressive legislation is being tightened across virtually all areas of public life, and new restrictions are being introduced in employment and education. Since the beginning of the mass releases on 3 July 2024, at least 3,200 people have become defendants in criminal cases, and at least 28,500 instances of detention, searches and other forms of criminal and administrative repression have been recorded. The number of people recognised as political prisoners, including former political prisoners, has increased from 3,391 (including 615 women) to 4,879 (including 906 women), an increase of 1,488 people. Of these, 885 remain imprisoned.

The release of individuals does not in itself put an end to the state's repressive actions against them. The forced expulsion of released prisoners from the country has become widespread and systematic (see the statement issued by the human rights coalition on 25 January 2025). To date, of the approximately 900 people whose release is known to us, at least 220 have been forcibly removed from the country. Furthermore, pressure on former political prisoners, both inside Belarus and abroad, continues.

We emphasise that any numbers relating to repression in Belarus today represent **a minimum estimate, not the full picture**. We record an incident only once it has been verified; consequently, data may be updated with a delay. For the purposes of monitoring and documenting violations, as well as ensuring fair rehabilitation, the date on which a person was detained, deprived of liberty or otherwise subjected to repression is not decisive. What matters is when the fact of their persecution becomes known to the public.

In light of the above, we draw particular attention to the fact that **quantitative indicators of repression, and the number of political prisoners in particular, are no longer sufficient on their own to assess the state of the system. Qualitative indicators are essential for assessing genuine change.** These include, first and foremost, the termination of politically motivated criminal proceedings; an end to torture, ill-treatment and other forms of discriminatory treatment of people imprisoned for political reasons; the ability of released political prisoners to participate fully in economic and social life and to choose freely where to reside; the repeal of the "passport decree"; and the ability of civil society organisations and independent media to operate freely, among many other factors.

A comprehensive list of criteria for monitoring the situation with repression in Belarus is set out in the document "Repressions' Benchmarks", developed by the human rights coalition in 2025 and available upon request.

In the absence of progress in these areas, changes in individual figures, whether increases or decreases, do not indicate qualitative change in the situation.

In view of the above, we call on the Belarusian authorities to:

- Ensure proper access to information on criminal and administrative prosecution, including relevant statistics and court decisions.
- Allow people who have been forcibly expelled to return safely to Belarus, and guarantee that people scheduled for release in the future have the right to freely choose where they will reside.
- Release all individuals recognised as political prisoners by human rights organisations, as well as those not yet identified by human rights organisations who have been convicted of "extremist offences".
- End politically motivated persecution in **all its forms**, including transnational repression, and establish a moratorium on repressive legal provisions introduced after 2020 until they are repealed or brought into line with international human rights standards.
- End repressive practices targeting civil society organisations, including independent trade unions, political parties and the media.

We call on international partners, including representatives of states and international organisations engaged in dialogue with the Belarusian authorities, to:

- Not treat the release of political prisoners as the sole relevant indicator of change in the situation with repression in Belarus.
- Take the broader picture of systemic restrictions into account when assessing the situation in Belarus, rather than relying solely on statistics on detentions, convictions and releases.
- When determining conditions for dialogue, easing sanctions, resuming cooperation or pursuing other forms of normalisation of relations with the Belarusian authorities, rely on a combination of quantitative and qualitative criteria that make it possible to assess systemic change, rather than the fluctuations of individual indicators.
- Bring this statement to the attention of **their migration authorities** and ensure that they are adequately informed, so that the cases of Belarusian nationals who genuinely face a risk of politically motivated persecution are assessed as comprehensively and objectively as possible.

We call on the migration authorities of countries hosting Belarusians who have been forced to leave their country to:

- When considering applications for international protection submitted by Belarusian nationals, give primary consideration to up-to-date data and analysis produced by Belarusian human rights organisations and the relevant United Nations bodies and mechanisms on Belarus, including the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus and the UN Group of Independent Experts on the situation of human rights in Belarus.

We call on Belarusian political actors and the expert community to:

- Avoid politicising human rights monitoring data and exercise responsibility in its interpretation and dissemination.
- When commenting on the situation with repression and releases, assess the situation comprehensively and emphasise qualitative changes in the system, so as not to create a

distorted understanding of the processes underway among Belarusian society and the international community.

Belarusian Helsinki Committee
PEN Belarus
Belarusian Human Rights House
Legal Initiative
Belarusian Association of Journalists
Human Constanta
Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
Respect-Protect-Fulfill
Lawtrend
Human Rights Center “Viasna”