

## **BELARUS: AUTHORITIES SHOULD IMMEDIATELY RELEASE ARRESTED HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER MARFA RABKOVA AND TERMINATE CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS AGAINST HER**

Statement by the members of the Civic Solidarity Platform

29 September 2020

We, the undersigned members of the international NGO network The Civic Solidarity Platform, express our strongest indignation about the arrest and criminal persecution of Belarusian human rights defender Marfa Rabkova, coordinator of the Volunteer Service of the Human Rights Centre "Viasna", and demand her immediate and unconditional release and dropping of all charges against her.

Human Rights Centre "Viasna" is a member organisation of the Civic Solidarity Platform and a recipient of the 2020 Democracy Defender Award, established by OSCE participating states.

Marfa Rabkova and her husband, Vadzim Zharomski, were detained on 17 September in Minsk by officers of the Interior Ministry's Main Directorate for Combating Organised Crime and Corruption. Their apartment was searched and money, personal belongings and IT equipment were seized. Vadzim Zharomski was later released but Marfa Rabkova was remanded as a suspect under Art. 293(3) of the Criminal Code ("training or other preparation of persons to participate in riots, or funding of such activities") which carries a prison sentence of up to three years. On 19 September, she was transferred to the pre-trial prison No. 1 in Minsk where she is currently being held. On 25 September, she was officially charged under Art. 293(3) of the Criminal Code

Belarusian human rights NGOs consider Marfa Rabkova a political prisoner. Amnesty International recognised her as a prisoner of conscience. Her arrest follows a number of acts of reprisal against and judicial harassment of human rights defenders by law enforcement representatives in Belarus since the results of the 2020 Presidential elections were announced on 9 August. These actions may have a chilling effect on the promotion and protection of human rights in the Belarus.

We believe that Belarusian authorities persecute Ms. Rabkova solely for her peaceful and legitimate human rights work such as observing demonstrations and documenting evidence of human rights violations, including torture and ill-treatment of peaceful protesters detained by law enforcement officials. Marfa Rabkova has committed no crime and there are no grounds for her prosecution. Her arrest, detention and prosecution are retaliation for her human rights work and constitute a major breach of Belarus' obligations under international human rights law and OSCE commitments.

We demand that Belarusian authorities immediately and unconditionally release Marfa Rabkova, terminate criminal proceedings against her and guarantee her physical and psychological security and integrity. Authorities should also stop pressure and persecution against members of Human Rights Center "Viasna" and all Belarusian human rights activists and guarantee 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 in all circumstances.

We urge OSCE executive and political bodies, institutions and participating States to take active public, diplomatic and other steps to ensure that Belarusian human rights defender Marfa Rabkova is immediately released and persecution against her is stopped.

### **Signatures:**

1. Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights, Russia
2. Netherlands Helsinki Committee
3. Freedom Files, Poland
4. Public Association "Human Rights Movement: Bir Duino-Kyrgyzstan"
5. Center for Civil Liberties, Ukraine

6. Foundation for the Promotion of Civil Society and Human Rights "Women of the Don", Russia
7. Public Verdict Foundation, Russia
8. Bulgarian Helsinki Committee
9. Helsinki Citizens' Assembly - Vanadzor, Armenia
10. Swedish OSCE-network
11. Sova Center for Information and Analysis, Russia
12. Helsinki Committee of Armenia
13. DRA – German-Russian Exchange, Germany
14. Public Association "Dignity", Kazakhstan
15. Article 19, UK
16. Truth Hounds, Ukraine
17. LIBERECO Partnership for Human Rights, Germany
18. Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Poland
19. Human Rights Monitoring Institute, Lithuania
20. Belarusian Helsinki Committee
21. The Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House, Lithuania
22. Human Rights Center "Memorial", Russia
23. IDP Women Association "Consent", Georgia
24. Index on Censorship, UK
25. International Partnership for Human Rights, Belgium
26. Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law

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## **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

### **About Marfa Rabkova and the ongoing persecution of members of "Viasna"**

Marfa Rabkova is a member of the Human Rights Centre "Viasna" where she coordinates the organisation's Volunteer Service. As part of her human rights activities, Marfa, together with "Viasna"'s volunteers, observed peaceful assemblies, took an active part in the independent observation campaign "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections", and participated in documenting evidence of torture and other ill-treatment of detained protesters. According to her colleagues, Marfa has held together hundreds if not thousands of people in the volunteer movement and motivated them for human rights work.

Throughout the presidential election campaign, during and after the 9 August election, members of "Viasna" faced harassment from the authorities, including arbitrary detention, administrative arrest and attempted criminal prosecution in connection with their human rights activities.

### **About Human Rights Centre "Viasna"**

Active from 1996, Human Rights Centre "Viasna" works to prevent all human rights violations in Belarus. Over years, it has grown into a leading human rights organisation in the country and has gained international recognition. Its initiatives have included monitoring prison conditions, election observation, campaigning for the abolition of death penalty, improved rule of law and an independent judiciary, advocating on behalf of Roma/Sinti individuals, campaigning on behalf of political prisoners, and working to ensure the free exercise of peaceful assembly. The organisation conducts research on the state of civil society and rule of law in Belarus, with the aim of improving implementation of human rights obligations, runs human rights education programmes, and provides practical assistance to civic initiatives for the legal defence of citizens.

In March 2020, Human Rights Centre "Viasna" became the recipient of the Democracy Defender Award. It was established in 2016 by eight OSCE participating states, and over the years the number of states supporting the award has grown to 36. It is awarded annually and honours a person or group for exceptional contributions to the promotion of democracy and the defence of human rights in the spirit of Helsinki Final Act principles and other OSCE commitments. Human Rights Centre "Viasna" received the Democracy Defender Award for its mission of defending human rights in Belarus and building a just, free and democratic society for all its citizens.

Chair of Human Rights Centre "Viasna" and former political prisoner Ales Bialiatski noted in March 2020 that the OSCE award is extremely important both for the members of "Viasna" and for all Belarusian human rights defenders: *"For over 24 years, Viasna has been courageously and steadfastly defending the rights of Belarusian citizens in difficult and unfavourable conditions. The Belarusian authorities deprived us of the state registration in 2003, thus ignoring us, despite the enormous human rights problems that still exist in Belarus. But it does not prevent us from helping and protecting the rights of victims of political repression, people in prisons, representatives of vulnerable groups, from actively opposing the death penalty, fighting for the right to a clean environment, for fair and transparent elections."* Mr. Bialiatski said that the award was a clear signal to the Belarusian authorities as an incentive to serious reforms in the field of human rights and a substantial improvement of the situation with the rights and freedoms of Belarusian citizens. *"Unless our goals are not achieved, we are not going to give up. The repressions against the Belarusian human rights defenders will not stop our work in support of democracy and human rights in our country. We are grateful to the OSCE participating states that nominated Human Rights Centre "Viasna". We believe that the courageous and persistent efforts by human rights defenders in the OSCE region, in spite of the obstacles, will help make our world a better place,"* said Ales Bialiatski.

During the current human rights and political crisis in Belarus, Human Rights Centre "Viasna" has been on the forefront of the struggle for human right, observing the elections, monitoring assemblies, providing assistance to victims of repression and documenting abuse of the law enforcement bodies against peaceful protestors and in places of detention.