

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY MUST ACT

SUPPORT THE RELEASE OF VIASNA MEMBERS & OTHER BELARUSIAN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS.



14 January marked 6 months since the detention of Viasna’s chairperson Ales Bialiatski, deputy chairperson Valiantsin Stefanovich and lawyer Uladzimir Labkovich. Since that day, the three Viasna activists have been in custody and the Minsk offices of Viasna have been sealed. Overall, seven Viasna’s human rights defenders are currently behind bars for carrying out their legitimate human rights work.

The international community must maintain pressure on the Belarusian authorities to:

- ! **Fully abide by their international human rights obligations as a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.**
- ! **Fully respect and protect the work of human rights defenders.**
- ! In line with these obligations, **release Marfa Rabkova, Andrei Chepyuk, Tatsyana Lasitsa, Leanid Sudalenka, Ales Bialatski, Valiantsin Stefanovich, and Uladzimir Labkovich** immediately and unconditionally, drop charges against them and other Viasna staff and volunteers, and ensure their right to a remedy for unlawful persecution.

Viasna members are facing charges of “organizing and financing group actions that grossly violate public order” (Parts 1 and 2 of Art. 342) and “tax evasion” (Part 2 of Art. 243 of the Criminal Code). The authorities notably claim that Viasna failed to register their organisation officially, thus evading its recognition as a tax agent [in 2003, the authorities deregistered the organization, and despite numerous attempts to re-register, Viasna has been forced to continue its work without official registration].

It is not known what stage the investigation is at and whether any investigative measures are being taken: lawyers are subject to non-disclosure orders, they cannot say anything even to the prisoners’ relatives. Activists cannot write about the case in letters either, as censorship will not get them out.

As part of this crackdown on Viasna, on December 30, 2021, the Čychunačny District Court of Homiel recognized the content of Viasna’s Telegram channel and social networks as “extremist materials”, subjecting their administrators and users to potential criminal liability. Members of the organisation, their families and volunteers continue to be detained and interrogated and their homes searched.

VIASNA HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS FACING UNLAWFUL PERSECUTION

There are concerns that none of the Viasna staff members or volunteers will face a fair trial. Conditions of detention are deplorable: all human rights defenders report that their eyesight has deteriorated due to the darkness of the cells, which makes reading almost impossible. The majority of human rights defenders have not been allowed to receive telephone calls or visits from family members, their correspondence is severely censored and often blocked.



Marfa Rabkova, coordinator of Viasna’s network of volunteers, was detained on 17 September 2020, and has been in pre-trial detention for 17 months as of January 2022. On January 6 she turned 27, this was her second birthday in a row behind bars. Marfa is charged under 11 articles of the Criminal Code and faces up to 20 years in prison. She is accused, among others, of organizing mass riots, calls for actions against national security, establishing an extremist organisation, management of a criminal organization, incitement to social hatred, hooliganism... Among the episodes imputed to her there are several crimes that investigators cannot solve for years. Her case will be soon sent to court.



Valiantsin Stefanovich, member of Viasna’s Board and vice-president of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), was detained on 14 July and faces up to seven years of imprisonment. For three weeks in November, Valiantsin had been staying in a prison hospital with pneumonia. His spirit remains strong, however: in his letters, he says feeling better and being grateful for people’s support and solidarity.



Ales Bialiatski, Viasna’s Chairman, was detained on 14 July and faces up to seven years of imprisonment. Over 25 years of human rights work, he has received numerous prestigious human rights awards, including Andrei Sakharov Freedom Award, PACE’s Václav Havel Human Rights Prize, and the Right Livelihood Award. He has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize five times.



Uladzimir Labkovich, Viasna’s lawyer, was detained on 14 July and faces up to seven years of imprisonment. He was not given access to his lawyer for several days after his detention, his mail is subject to severe censorship and his family didn’t receive any correspondence from him for the past three weeks.



Andrei Chepyuk, Viasna volunteer, was arrested on October 2, 2020. Andrei is charged with ‘participation in mass disorder’ and ‘membership of a criminal organization’. He faces up to seven years in prison.



Leanid Sudalenka, the director of the Homel branch of Viasna, was detained almost one year ago on 18 January 2021. On 3 November 2021 Centralny District Court of Homiel sentenced him to three years in prison. On 14 January 2022 this decision was confirmed in appeal.



Tatsyana Lasitsa, volunteer of the Homel branch of Viasna, was detained almost one year ago on 21 January 2021. On 3 November 2021 she was sentenced along with Leanid Sudalenka to two and a half years in prison, which was later confirmed in appeal.

Despite the inhuman conditions and draconian pressure exercised on human rights defenders, they hold their chins up high and continue to be an inspiration by demonstrating courage, dignity and commitment to humanistic values. In his 11 December letter, on the occasion of the World’s Human Rights day, Valiantsin Stefanovic wrote: “Viasna always has been and remains one of the brightest organizations in the human rights community. We stood at the origins of the human rights movement in Belarus in the 90s, we have been and remain at the forefront, always standing with the people [...] By imprisoning human rights defenders, they [Belarusian authorities] have drawn increasing attention to the important issue of political prisoners. So, we have done everything right. [...] Work that sometimes looks hopeless, but it may seem so only at first glance. Therefore, dear friends, on our professional day, stay bright-eyed and be proud of what you are doing!”

ABOUT VIASNA

Founded in 1996, Viasna is a leading human rights group in Belarus and has been actively monitoring and documenting human rights violations following the August 2020 disputed presidential elections. Viasna has faced harassment and interference from the Belarusian authorities throughout its existence. In 2003, the authorities deregistered the organization, and despite numerous attempts to re-register, Viasna has been forced to continue its work without official registration. In 2011, the Chair, Ales Bialiatski, was sentenced to four and a half years in prison on tax evasion charges and served almost three years of his sentence before being released in an amnesty in 2014.



More info belarus.fidh.org/freeviasna