



JOINT STATEMENT

BELARUS: Upcoming verdict in the case against Viasna members Maria Rabkova and Andrey Chapiuk

Paris-Geneva, September 5, 2022 - On September 6, Minsk City Court will pronounce the verdict in the politically motivated and harrowing case of human rights defenders Maria (Marfa) Rabkova and Andrey Chapiuk, in a climate of sweeping repression of civil society in Belarus. The signatory organisations call for their immediate and unconditional release, as well as for the release of all other human rights defenders arbitrarily detained in the country.

On September 6, 2022, at 15:00 Minsk time, after 17 months of investigation and [over four months of closed court hearings](#), the Minsk City Court will pass judgment in the trial of **Maria Rabkova**, coordinator of the volunteer service of the Human Rights Center "Viasna", and **Andrey Chapiuk**, a volunteer of Viasna. The two were arbitrarily detained on September 17, 2020 and October 2, 2020, respectively, in retaliation for their peaceful human rights activities. During almost two years of detention, Marfa Rabkova's health [has deteriorated considerably](#) due to the lack of adequate health care.

The trial against Marfa Rabkova and Andrey Chapiuk features eight other individuals and has been ongoing since April 25, 2022. All defendants are falsely accused of organising criminal groups between 2016 and 2020. Marfa Rabkova faces [charges](#) under ten articles of the Criminal Code, including "organising mass riots", participating therein and training or other preparation of persons to participate therein (Parts 1 to 3 of Art. 293), "inciting social hostility to the government" (Art. 130) and "involvement in a criminal organisation" (Part 2 of Art. 285), and faces up to 20 years in prison. For his part, Andrey Chapiuk is charged with "participating in mass riots" (Part 2 Art. 293 of the Criminal Code) and "involvement in a criminal organisation" (Part 2 of Art. 285 of the same Code) and faces up to eight years in prison.

The proceedings against them have also been marred by human rights violations: three of the defendants allege they were tortured or otherwise ill-treated by KGB agents and the hearings are being held behind closed doors.

The actual reason for the detention and prosecution of Viasna activists appears to be the human rights activities carried out by the organisation and its strong stand against government repression. Viasna has long been at the forefront of the Belarusian human rights movement being notably famous for maintaining a list of political prisoners in Belarus, which



now counts over 1,300 persons. In her role, Marfa Rabkova encouraged volunteers to engage in human rights work, coordinated election and protest monitoring campaigns, and documented torture.

The reprisals against Viasna and its members are part of a broader crackdown on civil society in Belarus. In 2021 alone, the authorities [shut down](#) more than 275 human rights and other independent organisations, leaving not one legally operating human rights NGO in the country. In addition, legislative amendments to the Criminal Code adopted in December 2021 [re-introduced](#) criminal liability for "acting on behalf of unregistered or liquidated organisations." The liquidation of all independent human rights organisations by the authorities has therefore led to a *de facto* criminalisation of human rights work. The rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, enshrined in international human rights instruments, including in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ratified by Belarus, have been severely and continuously violated by the authorities in recent years, which has had a chilling effect on civil society in the country.

The signatory organisations condemn the ongoing arbitrary detention of Marfa Rabkova and Andrey Chapiuk as well as of **Ales Bialiatski**, head of Viasna, **Valiantsin Stefanovic**, member of Viasna's Board and Vice-President of FIDH, **Uladzimir Labkovich**, lawyer and coordinator of the campaign "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections", **Leand Sudalenka**, lawyer of the Homiel (Gomel) branch of Viasna, and volunteer **Tatsiana Lasitsa**, and call for their immediate and unconditional release including the quashing of convictions of Sudalenka and Lasitsa and end of arbitrary administrative and criminal proceedings of all those awaiting trial.

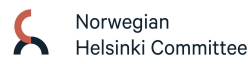
The signatory organisations reiterate their support to Viasna and all its members and urge Belarusian authorities to fully abide by their international human rights obligations, as well as to respect and protect the work of human rights defenders and organisations and ensure they can work without reprisal or intimidation.

Signatories:

1. Amnesty International
2. ARTICLE 19
3. The Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House
4. Belarusian Helsinki Committee
5. Center for Civil Liberties (Ukraine)
6. Civil Rights Defenders
7. FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders



The Barys Zvovskau
Belarusian
Human Rights
House



8. Front Line Defenders
9. Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights
10. Human Rights House Foundation
11. Human Rights Watch
12. International Partnership for Human Rights
13. Libereco – Partnership for Human Rights
14. Netherlands Helsinki Committee
15. Norwegian Helsinki Committee
16. Östgruppen (Swedish initiative for Democracies and human rights)
17. People in Need
18. Right Livelihood
19. World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders