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#freeViasna campaign: on the first anniversary of the crackdown on Viasna’s human rights centre in Belarus, human rights organisations call for the release of 7 human rights defenders

17 September 2021, marks a year since local authorities in Belarus detained the first member of [Human Rights Centre Viasna](#) (HRC Viasna) **Maria Rabkova**. Since then, 7 representatives of Viasna remain in detention, with dozens of other human rights defenders charged with civic and criminal violations for their non-violent human rights work. Front Line Defenders expresses grave concerns about the mass crackdown on human rights defenders in Belarus and calls upon Belarusian authorities to drop trumped-up charges and release imprisoned human rights defenders.

Since 17 September 2020, six more human rights defenders and members of Viasna have been detained since the initial arrest of [Maria Rabkova](#). On 2 October 2020, Belarusian authorities detained [Andrey Chapiuk](#), a Viasna volunteer, and charged him with participation in riots (Article 293, part 2 of the Belarusian Criminal Code). [Leanid Sudalenka](#), the chairperson of the Gomel Branch of Viasna was detained on 18 January 2021 charged with organising, financing, training, and preparing actions grossly violating public order (Article 342, parts 1 and 2 of the Belarusian Criminal Code). Along with [Leanid Sudalenka](#), authorities detained [Tatiana Lasica](#) and [Maria Tarasenka](#) on the same charges. Maria Tarasenka was released later under a pledge not to leave Belarus. On 14 July 2021, after a series of raids, authorities in Minsk [detained](#) Viasna leaders [Uladzimir Labkovich](#), [Valiantsin Stefanovich](#), and [Ales Bialiatski](#) with undisclosed charges relating to financial crimes. Colleagues of the human rights defenders’ believe that there are additional charges, that may be similar to those brought against the above-mentioned human rights defenders.

Maria Rabkova’s husband Vadim Zharomskii has reported that during the year-long detention, the woman human rights defender has been subjected to psychological abuse from the officials from the pre-trial detention facility #1 in Minsk. During her detention, Maria Rabkova’s health deteriorated severely. She suffered from at least two instances of syncope as well as a condition which caused damage to her teeth. Maria Rabkova also reported that she contracted COVID-19 in pre-trial detention and received no medical assistance for all of the health issues she experienced over the previous year.

Political persecution and detention of members and volunteers of Viasna coincide with the overall climate of a purge of civil society in Belarus, including rapid elimination of the free and independent institution of the National Bar. HRC Viasna has reported that lawyers have experienced complications with accessing their clients in pre-trial detention, often having zero to no privacy in violation of attorney-client privilege. After the arrest of Uladzimir Labkovich and his wife Nina, their respective lawyers gained access to them only six days later. Family members of the “Viasna seven”, many of whom remain in Belarus, also have minimal access to the human rights defenders. It is nearly impossible to gain personal visit privileges with the current political regime of incarceration; of the seven prosecuted Viasna members, only Leanid Sudalenka’s family could secure a visit. Lawyers report that the authorities within the pre-trial detention centres cite that the facilities are not equipped with enough visitation rooms as the reason behind systemic non-admissions.

Earlier in the year, the Belarusian Bar in the Region of Brest reported that the prosecutor's office sent out a memo stating that lawyers will be forced to sign non-disclosure agreements prohibiting them not only from commenting on the course of the pre-trial investigation and the events of the trial, but also to publicly identify the articles of the criminal code that relate to their clients' cases. At the same time, Belarusian Courts prohibiting the public and independent media representatives from attending trials upon the prosecutor's requests. A recent [court hearing](#) of Viasna's Leanid Sudalenka, Maryia Tarasenko, and Tatiana Lasica has set a precedent for closed door trials of human rights defenders.

HRC Viasna reports that human rights defenders in pre-trial detention are experiencing a severe distortion of written communication with the outside world. There are only a limited number of letters that people have received from human rights defenders. With a rapidly decreasing possibility of in-person visitation, HRC Viasna can not yet locate where the disruption in communication occurs. Such isolation contributes to the rapid deterioration of the mental health of the detained human rights defenders.

Front Line Defenders expresses grave concerns about the detention conditions of the human rights defenders in Belarus, including the practice of isolation and the absence of medical and legal support for the detained defenders. Front Line Defenders joins calls for the immediate and unconditional release of "Viasna 7" and all other persecuted human rights defenders in Belarus.

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