



## **Much More Decisive Actions by the International Community to Stop Repression and Support a Democratic Transition in Belarus Are Necessary**

**Statement by members of the Civic Solidarity Platform,  
participants of the OSCE Parallel Civil Society Conference in Stockholm, and other NGOs<sup>1</sup>**

**1 December 2021**

Much more decisive international actions to stop brutal repression by the Lukashenka regime and support Belarus on its path to democratic transition are needed. We are disappointed by the too slow and too timid reaction by the international community to the most brutal and large-scale repression in the recent European history which continues non-stop since last August and has recently spiralled up.

The total number of people affected by repression in Belarus is truly shocking. As of 26 November, 888 political prisoners are in custody<sup>2</sup>. Dozens of opposition and civil society leaders have been arrested, charged with heavy crimes against the state. Some have already been sentenced to long terms<sup>3</sup>. Not a single member of the permanent composition of the Coordination Council of the opposition remains free inside the country. Seven members of the Human Rights Centre "Viasna" continue to be held in pre-trial detention on arbitrary criminal charges<sup>4</sup>. At least 29 journalists and media workers are in detention centres and penal colonies<sup>5</sup>. Over 35,000 people have been detained since August last year for trying to exert their right to freedom of peaceful assembly, including women and children arrested for peacefully demonstrating solidarity with victims of police violence<sup>6</sup>. At least 1500 people remain behind bars and thousands are under investigation under politically motivated charges. Official data from the authorities state that almost 4700 criminal cases have been opened on charges of extremism and terrorism, "illegal mass gatherings", mass riots, and public security threats<sup>7</sup>. Human rights defenders continue to document numerous cases of ill-treatment of political prisoners and persons serving terms of administrative imprisonment for participating in peaceful assemblies. The inhumane conditions of detention for them are described by human rights defenders as torture.

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<sup>1</sup> The statement was signed by Civic Solidarity Platform members and other NGOs and presented to the OSCE leadership at the Parallel OSCE Civil Society Conference in Stockholm on 1 December 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Website on political prisoners. Human Rights Centre "Viasna". <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en>

<sup>3</sup> Maryia Kalesnikava and Maksim Znak sentenced to 11 and 10 years in prison. Website of Viasna HRC, 06.09.2021 <http://spring96.org/en/news/104877>; Viktor Babaryka sentenced to 14 years in prison. Human Rights Centre Viasna, 06.07.2021 <http://spring96.org/en/news/104161>; Белорусский оппозиционер Павел Северинец получил семь лет колонии усиленного режима. Настоящее время, 25.05.2021 <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/severinets-prigovor/31272330.html>

<sup>4</sup> The Viasna case. <https://freeviasna.org/en>

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Situation in Belarus: October 2021. HRC "Viasna", 04.11.2021. <https://spring96.org/en/news/105572>

<sup>6</sup> Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus Anaïs Marin. Human Rights Council Forty-seventh session 21 June–9 July 2021, A/HRC/47/49, 27.06.2021. <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/47/49>

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Situation in Belarus: July 2021. Human Rights Centre "Viasna", 02.08.2021. <http://spring96.org/en/news/104538>

Unprecedented police violence during the dispersal of protests, including the use of weapons against peaceful protestors, arbitrary mass detention, enforced disappearances, and torture of thousands of detainees shocked the Belarusian society<sup>8</sup>. Evidence of extreme violence, including heavy injuries from the use of truncheons and other special equipment, rubber bullets, stun grenades and tear gas, documented by civil society groups<sup>9</sup>, convincingly demonstrates that the use of force was disproportionate, systematic, and illegal. Hundreds of people sought medical help in the first days of the crackdown. Photos and videos of their scars and injuries<sup>10</sup> have caused outrage around the world. Numerous testimonies of victims and witnesses and NGO reports show horrific pictures of sadistic violence by riot police and special units to combat organized crime. Detainees were subjected to degrading treatment and inhumane conditions<sup>11</sup>.

As part of this attack, the regime has forcibly displaced thousands of civilians beyond its borders, through violence, intimidation, forced eviction, and other forms of coercion. By May 2020, an estimated number of 14,000 Belarusians had fled to neighbouring countries<sup>12</sup>. Since then many more thousands have fled the country. At least six opposition leaders were physically taken to the border and forcibly expelled.

In a communication to the International Criminal Court in May 2021, a group of international human rights NGOs and lawyers claimed that the “campaign of repression, unleashed by the Lukashenko regime on the Belarusian population since June 2020, amounts to a widespread and systematic attack on the civilian population – in other words – crimes against humanity”, and asked the ICC Prosecutor to launch an investigation into the situation in Belarus<sup>13</sup>. The forced displacement of civilians amounts to the crimes against humanity of deportation and persecution, conclude experts in international law.

While thousands peaceful civilians have been subjected to criminal persecution, not a single case on allegations of torture or use of force by law enforcement officers has been opened. Moreover, the Investigation Committee announced that after reviewing over 700 complaints about violence and torture by law enforcement officers during apprehension at the protests and in the detention centre at Akrestina street in August 2020, it had found no grounds for opening criminal investigation as “the use of force and special equipment was lawful and proportionate”, and that the submission of complaints “was orchestrated”<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> “You are not Human Beings”. State-sponsored impunity and unprecedented police violence against peaceful protestors. Report by Amnesty International. 27.01.2021 <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR4935672021ENGLISH.PDF>

Corridor of Truncheons. How popular demonstrations are met with massive police violence and denial of justice. Report by the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and the Committee against Torture (CAT). January 2021 [https://www.civicsolidarity.org/sites/default/files/doklad\\_en\\_web.pdf](https://www.civicsolidarity.org/sites/default/files/doklad_en_web.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Expert: protestors were subjected to abuse and torture. iSANS, 19.08.2020 <https://isans.org/analysis-en/policy-papers-en/expert-protesters-were-subjected-to-abuse-and-torture.html>; Belarus: Violence, Abuse in Response to Election Protests. Thousands Detained; Beatings, Stun Grenades, Rubber Bullets. Human Rights Watch, 11.08.2020 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/11/belarus-violence-abuse-response-election-protests>

<sup>10</sup> Law enforcement agencies unlawfully used weapons to disperse peaceful protests. ISANS. 02.03.2021 <https://isans.org/analysis-en/reports-en/the-use-of-weapons-by-belarusian-law-enforcement-agencies-to-disperse-peaceful-protests.html>

<sup>11</sup> Belarus: Systematic Beatings, Torture of Protesters. OSCE, UN Human Rights Council Inquiries Needed. Human Rights Watch, 15.08.2020 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/15/belarus-systematic-beatings-torture-protesters>

<sup>12</sup> The Situation in Belarus/Lithuania/Poland/Latvia and Ukraine: Crimes Against Humanity of Deportation and Persecution. Communication under Article 15(2) of the Rome Statute to the International Criminal Court by International Partnership for Human Rights, Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Global Diligence LLP, and Truth Hounds. May 2021. [https://www.civicsolidarity.org/sites/default/files/by\\_icc\\_submission.pdf](https://www.civicsolidarity.org/sites/default/files/by_icc_submission.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Применение силы было соразмерным и оправданным: СК отказал в возбуждении уголовного дела по фактам жестокости силовиков. Zerkalo, 26.08.2021 <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/2103.html>

Massive assault by the de facto Belarusian authorities on democratically-minded persons, pro-democracy groups, independent media and journalists<sup>15</sup>, social media and online activists<sup>16</sup>, NGOs<sup>17</sup>, and human rights lawyers<sup>18</sup> has intensified since July 2021, aiming at complete elimination of civil society in the country and shutting up any and all critical voices.

Most recently, the emboldened dictator extended this major human rights and political crisis in Belarus into a serious security crisis at the EU borders by cynically instrumentalising and abusing irregular migrants from the Middle East who were brought in thousands to the border at once with covert assistance of the Belarusian authorities and sometimes overt support of their law enforcement bodies. They have become new hostages of the criminal regime. Human suffering of these people has been added to the pain of hundreds of thousands of Belarusians who have been persecuted, forced to flee, put in jail, tortured, and killed.

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Unprecedented crackdown requires unprecedented response – a strong, timely, comprehensive, sustained over time, and well-coordinated reaction from states that care for democracy and human rights. It should combine political pressure, use of legal tools at international and national level, progressive application of effective economic sanctions, preparing a major package of assistance for the transitional period, and scaling up support to pro-democracy forces, civil society, independent media, victims of repression, and Belarusians in exile. Too many words and too little action is what we observe. Elements of a strategy of a comprehensive international response are already at work but every week of delay in taking truly effective multilateral action costs enormous suffering of Belarusians and makes the transition in the future more challenging.

In particular, concerned states should take the following steps without delay:

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<sup>15</sup> Press under Pressure. Evidence of repression against independent media and journalists in Belarus. Belarusian Press Club. <https://en.underpressure.press-club.by/>. Repressions against journalists in Belarus, 2021 (chart). Belarusian Association of Journalists, 18.11.2021 <https://baj.by/en/analytics/repressions-against-journalists-belarus-2021-chart>. Reporters Without Borders: Belarus Is the Most Dangerous Country in Europe for Journalists. Belarusian Association of Journalists, 20.04.2021 <https://baj.by/en/analytics/reporters-without-borders-belarus-most-dangerous-country-europe-journalists>.

<sup>16</sup> 174 тэлеграм-каналы і чаты прызнаныя ў Беларусі "эктрэмісцкімі". Website of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, 21.08.2021 <https://baj.by/be/content/174-telegram-kanaly-i-chaty-pryznanyya-u-belarusi-ekstremisckimi>

<sup>17</sup> Since mid-July 2021, 284 NGOs have been liquidated by the authorities or are in the process of liquidation. See "The list of Belarusian CSOs that are in the process of forced liquidation". Lawtrend and OEEC." <https://bit.ly/3HXSfFc>. In addition, at least 160 more NGOs have taken a decision to self-liquidate under pressure from authorities. See "The list of Belarusian NGOs which have taken a decision to self-liquidate". Lawtrend and OEEC." <https://bit.ly/311ITrL>. Accessed on 25 November 2021. No business as usual possible with the Lukashenko regime: International community should immediately and strongly react to a new massive wave of repression against civil society in Belarus. Statement by the Civic Solidarity Platform, 15.07.2021. <https://www.civicsolidarity.org/article/1820/no-business-usual-possible-lukashenko-regime-international-community-should-immediately>

<sup>18</sup> Belarusian Authorities Retaliate Against Lawyers Defending Human Rights. Human Rights Centre "Viasna", 27.10.2021. <https://spring96.org/en/news/105476>. Statement on the mounting repression against Belarusian lawyers and the disbarment of Dmitry Laevski. Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Article 19, World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (CCBE), 02.08.2021 [https://www.hfhr.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Belarus\\_Lawyers\\_Laevski-Statement\\_Segnees\\_07.2021\\_RU\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.hfhr.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Belarus_Lawyers_Laevski-Statement_Segnees_07.2021_RU_ENG.pdf)

- Ensure a **meaningful follow-up to the 2020 OSCE Moscow Mechanism report** on the situation in Belarus<sup>19</sup>, including by visible public activities. These could include but not be limited to regularly making strong joint and individual statements; commissioning a new report or an update to the 2020 report to assess the implementation of the recommendations in the 2020 Moscow Mechanism report; reviewing progress in the implementation of the 2020 civil society recommendations “Agenda for International Support of a Human Rights and Democracy Transition in Belarus”<sup>20</sup>, etc.
- Stimulate **presence** of the voice of credible and widely recognised representatives of Belarusian civil society and opposition **at OSCE events**.
- Follow the advice of credible civil society and opposition voices on **the constitutional reform process, set up monitoring of the referendum process**, even from outside Belarus.
- Continue the **non-recognition of Lukashenka as president** and reiterate it. Do not recognise legitimacy of the Belarusian government, as it was appointed by the illegitimate ruler. While accepting the necessity of communication with the government, treat it as a de-facto authority which has power and responsibility but no legitimacy. **Acknowledge Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as a legitimate democratic transit leader**.
- Establish **an informal group on the situation in Belarus**, comprised of representatives of concerned states (“**friends of Belarus**”) for better coordination among delegations in Vienna and capitals and for regular and systematic contacts with relevant NGOs, Belarusian pro-democracy forces, and other actors.
- Hold **meetings, sessions and activities with the focus on Belarus during relevant international** events on torture prevention, rule of law, media freedom, situation of human rights defenders, elections, etc.
- **Scale up support to pro-democracy forces and victims of repression**. Governments, parliaments, media, civil society and others in democratic countries should use various ways of expressing their solidarity, including increasing their support for civil society and independent media, accommodating Belarusians who have been forced to in exile, “adopting” political prisoners, etc. People fleeing the repression should be supported in obtaining legal status. Diaspora groups should be recognised as valuable interlocutors.
- **Prohibit or strongly advice against cooperation** of civil society organisations, including professional, sports, academic associations, **with Belarusian counterparts that are dominated by Lukashenka aligned forces** and have thrown out members that support a democratic future. This also applies to international cooperation in the law enforcement and judicial sector.
- Support **active application of legal tools** at international and national level to end impunity and deter repression. Legal framework is available in the UN and the OSCE reports, resolutions of the UN Human Rights Council, European Parliament, PACE, and OSCE PA. Follow up on them more boldly. Paving the way to ending impunity through documentation by **the UN Expert Mechanism** on Belarus and the **International Accountability Platform for Belarus** is very important. However, due to budget cuts the

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<sup>19</sup> OSCE Rapporteur’s Report under the Moscow Mechanism on Alleged Human Rights Violations related to the Presidential Elections of 9 August 2020 in Belarus. OSCE ODIHR, 20.10.2020. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/b/469539.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> “Agenda for International Support of a Human Rights and Democracy Transition in Belarus”. 01.12.2020. [https://www.civicsolidarity.org/sites/default/files/agenda\\_for\\_intnl\\_support\\_of\\_hr\\_dem\\_transition\\_in\\_belarus\\_01.12.2020\\_eng\\_0.pdf](https://www.civicsolidarity.org/sites/default/files/agenda_for_intnl_support_of_hr_dem_transition_in_belarus_01.12.2020_eng_0.pdf)

start of their work has been slow. States should **support them more actively**, including by demanding allocation of the requested budget at the UN and extending the mandate of the UN Mechanism.

- Strong evidence collected by the two mechanisms and professionally compiled case files are not enough: prosecution needs to follow. For **universal jurisdiction** to bring perpetrators to justice in different states, governments need to prioritise this work, provide it with political backing and invest resources.
- Crimes of the Lukashenka regime against civilians should be acknowledged as **crimes against humanity**. State parties to the Rome Statute should make **referrals to the ICC** Prosecutor, arguing that crimes had several elements, starting in Belarus and continuing in other countries which ratified the Statute where victims of crimes were forcibly expelled to or had to flee. States should support the NGO submission to the ICC in May 2021. Moreover, states should treat Lukashenka and his close associates as criminals who have brazenly violated international human rights law and committed crimes against humanity. Discussions about the establishment of an **international tribunal** should be started without delay, as unrealistic as it may seem now, given the composition of the UN Security Council. Putting things in the right perspective and making public statements is a very important element of pressure.
- Economic basis of the regime should be undermined further by **strictly applying economic sanctions** that have already been imposed and by regularly **adding new packages**, including further sectoral and financial sanctions. Sanctions should be built up **consistently and progressively**, at more regular intervals and maintained until a legitimate government is in place that is democratically accountable for economic and financial policy, including the management of state owned enterprises. That means free and fair elections should be held under international control and with prior release of all political prisoners and the ending of repression. Concerned states should use their investigative capacity to **cut off grey schemes used by Lukashenka and his proxies to circumvent sanctions**, and update designations for sanctions immediately once an evasion scheme is detected. Companies should not cooperate with counterparts that are state owned or only nominally independent and that severely violate international labour rights standards.

*Signatures:*

1. Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights (Russia)
2. Freedom Files (Poland)
3. Netherlands Helsinki Committee (Netherlands)
4. Libereco Partnership for Human Rights (Germany/Switzerland)
5. Center for Civil Liberties (Ukraine)
6. Human Rights Movement “Bir Duino” (Kyrgyzstan)
7. Public Association “Kadir-Kasiet”/ “Dignity” (Kazakhstan)
8. Citizens' Watch (Russia)
9. Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law (Kazakhstan)
10. Promo LEX (Moldova)
11. Human Rights Center (Georgia)
12. Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (Bulgaria)
13. Truth Hounds (Ukraine/Georgia)
14. Human Rights in Mental Health-FGIP (international)
15. ZMINA Human Rights Center (Ukraine)
16. Center for Participation and Development (Georgia)
17. Norwegian Helsinki Committee (Norway)

18. World Organisation against Torture (OMCT) (international)
19. The International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT) (international)
20. Kharkiv Regional Foundation “Public Alternative” (Ukraine)
21. Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (Poland)
22. Albanian Helsinki Committee (Albania)
23. Association of Ukrainian Human Rights Monitors on Law Enforcement (Association UMDPL) (Ukraine)
24. United for Intercultural Action (international)
25. Macedonian Helsinki Committee (North Macedonia)
26. Georgian Centre for Psychosocial and Medical Rehabilitation of Torture Victims – GCRT (Georgia)
27. Helsinki Citizens' Assembly – Vanadzor (Armenia)
28. The Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House (Lithuania)
29. Swiss Helsinki Committee (Switzerland)
30. Human Rights Club (Azerbaijan)
31. Crude Accountability (USA)
32. Human Rights Monitoring Institute (Lithuania)
33. Association humanrights.ch (Switzerland)
34. Swedish OSCE Network (Sweden)
35. Public Verdict Foundation (Russia)
36. Human Rights Centre “Memorial” (Russia)
37. Public Foundation Notabene (Tajikistan)
38. IDP Women Association "Consent" (Georgia)
39. German-Russian Exchange – DRA (Germany)
40. Centre de la Protection Internationale (France)
41. Human Rights Matter e.V. (Germany)
42. Freedom Now (USA)
43. Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan (Azerbaijan)
44. Belarus Free Theatre (the UK/Belarus)
45. Creative Politics Hub (the UK)
46. “Women of the Don” (Russia)
47. Center for Belarusian Solidarity (Poland)
48. Free Press Unlimited (Netherlands)
49. Free Press for Eastern Europe (Czechia)
50. Östgruppen – Swedish Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (Sweden)
51. Moscow Helsinki Group (Russia)