

URGENT ACTION

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS HELD IN PRETRIAL DETENTION

Ales Bialiatski, Chairman of the Human Rights Centre Vyasna, Vyasna's lawyer Uladzimir Labkovich and his partner Nina Labkovich, as well as the Vice Chairman of Vyasna, Valyantsyn Stefanovich were transferred to pretrial detention on 17 July. They were arrested on 14 July alongside other human rights defenders, members of opposition groups and civil society leaders, following raids by Belarus law enforcement officers as part of the systemic crackdown of civil society and human rights activists that has been ongoing since the post-election protests of August 2020.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Andrey Shved

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Dear Prosecutor General,

*I am writing to express my deep concern about the arrests on 14 July and subsequent transfer to pretrial detention on 17 July of the Chairman of the Human Rights Centre Vyasna, **Ales Bialiatski**, Vyasna's lawyer **Uladzimir Labkovich**, **Nina Labkovich**, as well as vice chairman of Vyasna **Valyantsyn Stefanovich**.*

They were arrested on 14 July alongside others during the raids carried out by law enforcement officers on the offices of at least a dozen major Belarusian civil society and human rights organizations and opposition groups, as well the homes of civil society leaders. These raids and arbitrary arrests are just another instance of the crackdown against human rights defenders, civil society organizations and independent media that has been going on since the widely disputed presidential election in August 2020, when thousands of Belarusians took to the streets in mostly peaceful protests.

Amnesty International already documented in February mass raids and interrogations of staff members of Vyasna, the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the REP independent trade union and dozens of civil society activists. These raids were carried out as part of unfounded criminal proceedings under Article 342 of the Criminal Code of Belarus ("organization and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order") aimed at "establishing the circumstances of the financing of protest activities". In March, the Belarusian Investigative Committee opened a criminal case into the activities of Vyasna under Article 342 of the Criminal Code, which is believed to be the reason for the pretrial detention of Valyantsyn Stefanovich, Uladzimir Labkovich, Nina Labkovich and Ales Bialiatski. Article 342 has been consistently misused by the authorities to launch unfounded cases targeting civil society activists, journalists and human rights monitors.

In the light of the above, I urge you to do everything in your power to ensure the immediate release of Valyantsyn Stefanovich, Uladzimir Labkovich, Nina Labkovich and Ales Bialiatski as they have committed no recognizable criminal offence and are being prosecuted in retaliation for their human rights work.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

On 14 July, Belarus law enforcement officers broke into and searched the offices of at least a dozen major Belarusian civil society and human rights organizations and opposition groups, as well the homes of civil society leaders. The list of those targeted included the human rights group Vyasna, Belarusian Association of Journalists, Belarusian Helsinki Committee, the human rights group Human Constanta, the independent academic research centre BEROCC, the human rights group Gender Perspectives, World Union of Belarusians Batskaushchyna, Belarusian People's Front opposition party, "For Freedom" pro-democracy movement and Imena publishing house. At least 12 people were arrested on 14 July. Some were released over the following days but Vyasna chairman Ales Bialiatski, Vyasna vice chairman Valyantsyn Stefanovich, and the organization's lawyer Uladzimir Labkovich and his wife Nina Labkovich, were transferred to a pretrial detention centre on 17 July.

This is just the latest instance in a coordinated and systematic campaign to stifle human rights defenders and any form of criticism of the authorities in Belarus following the post-election protests that started in August 2020. Previously, on 16 February, the authorities carried out raids simultaneously in Minsk, Homel, Mahilyou, Vitsebsk and Brest on the homes of staff and offices of Vyasna, the Belarusian Association of Journalists and the independent trade union REP. The raids were carried out as part of unfounded criminal proceedings under Article 342 of the Criminal Code of Belarus ("organization and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order"). According to Belarus' Investigative Committee, the investigation was aimed at "establishing the circumstances of the financing of protest activities". In March, the Belarusian Investigative Committee opened a criminal case into the activities of Vyasna under Article 342 of the Criminal Code.

In common with most other criminal cases against civil society activists in Belarus the lawyers have been required to sign non-disclosure agreements and cannot reveal the details of the case. Nevertheless, it is believed that the pretrial detention of Valyantsyn Stefanovich, Uladzimir Labkovich, Nina Labkovich and Ales Bialiatski may be connected to the criminal case under Article 342, an article that has been used by the authorities to launch unfounded cases targeting civil society activists, journalists and human rights monitors.

Amnesty International has campaigned extensively for Ales Bialatski in the past. He was arrested on 4 August 2011 and sentenced to a four-and-a-half-year in jail for using his personal bank accounts in Lithuania and Poland to fund the Human Rights Centre Vyasna. The organization was not officially recognized by the Belarusian government and could not hold a bank account in the country. He featured in the Write for Rights Campaign in 2012 and was released before the expiration of sentence in 2014.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Belarusian, Russian.

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 15 September 2021

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PRONOUN: Ales Bialiatski (he/his), Valyantsyn Stefanovich (he/his), Uladzimir Labkovich (he/his) and Nina Labkovich (she/her)