

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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BELARUS: MARFA RABKOVA AND ALL PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE MUST BE IMMEDIATELY AND UNCONDITIONALLY RELEASED

The Belarusian authorities must immediately and unconditionally release human rights defender, Marfa Rabkova, and all those detained as criminal suspects on false charges and solely for exercising their human rights. They must also stop immediately the practice of arbitrary arrest and unlawful deprivation of freedom and holding detainees incommunicado for hours and even days – a practice which they have been widely using against their opponents in recent weeks.

Amnesty International believes Marfa Rabkova has been targeted solely for her work protecting the human rights of others and is a prisoner of conscience.

Marfa Rabkova works for the prominent non-governmental organisation Human Rights Centre “Viasna”, a close and longstanding partner of Amnesty International and a leading human rights voice in Belarus. In recent weeks, Viasna has been one of the most important sources of information about human rights violations in the country. Marfa Rabkova has been a crucial member of that effort, coordinating the monitoring of street protests and the collection of testimonies of survivors of torture and other human rights violations.

On the evening of 17 September, Marfa Rabkova was detained alongside her husband, Vadzim Zharomski, by officers of the Interior Ministry’s Main Directorate for Combating Organized Crime and Corruption (GUBAZIK). Their apartment was searched and money, personal belongings and IT equipment were seized. Vadzim Zharomski was later released but Marfa Rabkova was informed that she was detained as part of a criminal case under Art. 293(3) of the Criminal Code (training or other preparation of persons to participate in riots, or funding of such activities). This is a crime punishable by up to three years of imprisonment.

The detention of human rights defender, Marfa Rabkova, comes in the context of a drastic deterioration in the human rights situation in Belarus. During the campaign period and following the presidential election on 9 August, there have been mass peaceful protests including against the widely disputed official results. Throughout, the authorities have engaged in an escalating campaign against the opposition and all dissenting voices. Thousands of people have been arbitrarily arrested by police, an overwhelming majority of them peaceful protesters or bystanders, and many apprehended in abduction-style arrest by masked plain-clothed men.

According to countless first-hand testimonies, widely available photographic and video material, and medical documents, many if not all of those detained have been subjected to torture and other ill-treatment. The detention centre on Akrestsina, in the capital Minsk, where Marfa Rabkova is held at the time of writing, has become synonymous with the practice of vicious beatings and allegations of sexual violence and other inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Like Marfa Rabkova, dozens of high-profile political and civil society activists and their associates have been arrested under trumped-up charges and subsequently remanded as criminal suspects.

They should all be immediately released, and all other human rights violations must stop immediately, including the dispersal of peaceful assemblies, mass arrests and the widespread ill-treatment and torture of detainees.