

URGENT ACTION

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS REMAIN IN DETENTION

Belarusian human rights defenders Ales Bialiatski, Valyantsin Stefanovich and Uladzimir Labkovich remain in pretrial detention and face trumped up charges in retaliation for their human rights work with the Human Rights Center Viasna. Nina Labkovich who was detained with them was released on 23 July. Their prosecution is part of the systemic crackdown of civil society and human rights activists that has been ongoing since the post-election protests of August 2020. They have committed no crime and should be immediately released.

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

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Dear Prosecutor General,

*I am writing to express my deep concern about the arrest on 14 July and subsequent transfer to pretrial detention on 17 July of the chair of the Human Rights Centre Viasna, **Ales Bialiatski**, the vice chair of Viasna **Valyantsin Stefanovich**, and Viasna's lawyer **Uladzimir Labkovich**. They are human rights defenders who have committed no crime and are being targeted in retaliation for their human rights work.*

Ales Bialiatski, Valyantsin Stefanovich and Uladzimir Labkovich were arrested on 14 July alongside others during the most recent instance of mass raids by law enforcement targeting civil society, opposition groups and human rights organizations. In March, the Belarusian Investigative Committee had opened a criminal case into the activities of Viasna under Article 342 of the Criminal Code ("organization and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order"), which is believed to be the reason for the pretrial detention of Valyantsin Stefanovich, Uladzimir Labkovich and Ales Bialiatski. Article 342 has been consistently misused to launch unfounded cases targeting civil society activists, independent media and human rights defenders as part of the ongoing crackdown 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.

In the light of the above, I urge you to do everything in your power to ensure the immediate release of Valyantsin Stefanovich, Uladzimir 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 as the homes of civil society leaders. The list of those targeted included the human rights group Viasna, 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 in the following days but Viasna chair Ales Bialiatski, Viasna vice chair Valyantsin Stefanovich, the organization's lawyer Uladzimir Labkovich and his wife Nina Labkovich, were transferred to a pretrial detention centre on 17 July. Nina Labkovich was subsequently released on 23 July.

This is just the last instance of 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. Already on 16 February, the authorities carried out raids simultaneously in Minsk, Homel, Mahilyou, Vitsebsk and Brest on the homes of staff and offices of Viasna, the Belarusian Association of Journalists and the independent trade union REP. The raids took place 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 Viasna under Article 342 of the Criminal Code.

The lawyers of all three detainees have been forced to sign non-disclosure agreements, but it is believed that the pretrial detention of Valyantsin Stefanovich, Uladzimir Labkovich, and Ales Bialiatski may be connected to the criminal case opened against them in March 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. There are also signs that they may be charged with tax evasion or other financial crimes. In a social media post on 16 July the investigative committee suggested they were being investigated, along with other NGO members for "shadow transfer of funds" and tax evasion. On 29 July, Ales Bialiatski's wife, Natalia Pinchuk received the first letter from him which was numbered "three", the first two letters did not reach her. Valyantsin Stefanovich's family also received letters from him in which he told them: "I am preparing for a very long separation from the free world, but all the same I am hoping for better. Everything passes and this will pass too, and we will be together again."

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Belarusian, Russian.
You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 28 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), Valyantsin Stefanovich (he/his), Uladzimir Labkovich (he/his)

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur49/4494/2021/en/>