

*10 August 2018*

**Statement by Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum on the release of journalists in Belarus detained in connection with the alleged offences committed by several online publications in the country**

The Steering Committee welcomes the release of journalists detained on August 8-9, in connection with a case of alleged hacking of content belonging to BelTA, a government information agency. We fully support a statement on this matter issued by the EaP CSF Belarussian National Platform and thank those who protested on behalf of the of the detained journalists, including the spokesman of the secretary general of the Council of Europe.

We fail to understand the motives of the wide-ranging police action, which involved the allegedly illegal dissemination of materials produced by BelTA (which reports favourably on government initiatives). Thus, how could the dissemination of such materials by other online publications ‘cause significant harm’ as is stated in Part 2 of article 349 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus, which was applied in this case?

Indeed, it seems that the real reason for the detentions, searches and interrogations connected with this case was to harrass independent online media and comes against the background of violations of the right to disseminate information and intimidate journalists in Belarus. Thus, we also condemn recent actions against BelaPAN founder Alexander Lipai and journalists working with the Belsat TV Channel.

This police action by the Belarussian authorities casts a shadow on the ongoing exchange between Belarus and the European Union, which includes the Human Rights Dialogue – as it shows that respect for the principles which govern media independence remains low in Belarus. This trend must be reversed if relations between the European Union and Belarus are to be placed on a proper footing.

*Members of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum*