

EAP CSF STEERING COMMITTEE STATEMENT ON THE URGENT NEED FOR INTERNATIONAL ACTION REGARDING POLITICAL PRISONERS

In memoriam Ihar Lednik and all political prisoners who died behind bars

Brussels, 27 February 2024: The EaP CSF Steering Committee mourns the death of Ihar Lednik, Belarusian civil society activist, member of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and Belarusian National Platform, and political prisoner unlawfully detained and sentenced in a penal colony since 2022. His death reaffirms the critical need for international action to address the dramatic situation of political prisoners.

Ihar Lednik died in prison on 20 February 2024. Ihar Lednik will be remembered for his civil society work and courage to speak against Lukashenka's regime that ultimately costed his health and life. Aged 64, Ihar's health deteriorated considerably following his arrest, and Belarusian authorities' failure to provide adequate medical care. Ihar is the fifth political prisoner to die behind bars in Belarus, following **Vitold Ashurak, Mikalai Klimovich, Ales Pushkin, and Vadzim Khrasko**. The ultimate responsibility for the deaths of political prisoners lies with the dictators who put them behind bars: without the crime of sending opponents to jail and torturing them in inhuman conditions, these dissidents – our colleagues – would still be alive.

Today, at least 1420 Belarusians¹ and 200 Azerbaijanis² remain behind bars on bogus charges or await trial, many suffering or developing health problems that threaten their lives.

Earlier this month, the death of Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny on 16 February has outraged the international community, sending a chilling message among thousands of political prisoners and their families. His death shows that, despite international support and attention to his case, no political prisoner is safe. This is a moment for all of us to be more vocal and demand the immediate and unconditional release of political prisoners in Belarus and Azerbaijan, and everywhere around the world.” said Irina Sukhy, EaP CSF National Facilitator of the Belarusian National Platform.

As we mourn the death of political prisoners in abhorrent prison conditions, we continue to fear for the lives of those who remain behind bars with no access to medical care despite their deteriorating health conditions and advanced age, including EaP CSF members **Gubad Ibadoghlu** in Azerbaijan, and **Ales Bialiatski** in Belarus.

In the context of unfree and undemocratic elections orchestrated this year on 7 February by Ilham Aliyev in Azerbaijan and sham local and parliamentary “elections” held on 25 February by Alyaksandr Lukashenka in Belarus, and as democracy erodes more and more in the two countries putting at risk the life of all political prisoners,

We *call* on the international community to respond decisively to every death of a political prisoner, sending a strong message of deterrence. In the wake of Alexey Navalny's passing, we advocate for swift action, including the immediate allocation of the \$300 billion USD worth of Russian frozen assets for Ukraine's military and reconstruction efforts. Additionally, we *call* for the release of vital financial support for Ukraine in the United States, the imposition of

¹ According to Viasna Human Rights Center, as of 22 February there are 1420 persons in Belarus considered political prisoners. The full list is available at <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en>.

² The number of political prisoners in Azerbaijan is officially unknown, however civil society organisations and international organisations refer to 200 political prisoners, an increased number since the same time of the year in 2023.

sanctions, and the seizure of assets held in the West for the more than 8000 individuals listed by Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation³. Furthermore, we propose a mechanism to swiftly convert these assets of war criminals into aid for Ukraine. Such a rapid and comprehensive response would dissuade other dictators from emulating Russia's actions.

We *call* on the international community to continue to advocate for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners in Azerbaijan and Belarus,

We *urge* the donor community to financially support civil society organisations that offer legal services to political prisoners and activists at risk of imprisonment, and support political prisoners, their families and defense lawyers during imprisonment and after their release,

We *call* on EU member states and EU institutions to facilitate an emergency EU visa application procedure for human rights defenders and independent journalists at risk of imprisonment,

We *urge* all international and regional financial institutions to ensure that assistance to Azerbaijan and Belarus is conditional to state authorities respecting human rights and releasing political prisoners,

We *demand* the governments of Azerbaijan and Belarus to provide political and all other prisoners with access to medical care, drop all politically motivated charges against them, and immediately release them.

“We fear that without a strong, swift, and unified global response to Alexey Navalny's death in a Siberian prison, dictators will only grow bolder. They won't hesitate to silence opposition within prison walls, and they may even extend their reach to target dissenters in diaspora communities. Worse yet, they could set their sights on challenging Western critical voices, from civil society to intellectuals and politicians. This is a dangerous trend that demands immediate action now.” said Ana Otilia Nutu, EaP CSF Steering Committee co-chair.

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

³ The list provided by the Anti-Corruption Foundation can be consulted at <https://acf.international>.