

EaP CSF Steering Committee statement on the recent arrests of Ulad Vialichka, Uladzimir Matskevich, Tatsiana Vadalazhskaya, and Oksana Shelest

Brussels, 5th August 2021

Since the illegitimate Belarusian government decided to [unilaterally withdraw from the Eastern Partnership on June 28th](#), repression against any form of dissent, both outside and inside the country, has ramped up with extreme violence. Domestically, heightened political oppression has translated into wave after wave of [attacks against civil society activists, human rights defenders, journalists](#), and [civil society organisations themselves](#). Internationally, Lukashenka's regime has shown its horrifying resolve to suppress opposition with complete disregard for international law. Its toolbox of terror means includes air piracy and detention of the young activists Roman Protasevich and Sofia Sapega, attempted forced abduction of the Belarusian sprinter Kristyna Timanouskaya, and potential involvement under suspicious circumstances in the death of Belarusian activists living abroad such as Vitaly Shishov, the head of the Kyiv-based NGO "Belarusian House in Ukraine".

In this lawless context, this week, another wave of arrests against civil society activists led to the unlawful detention of **Ulad Vialichka**, former Chairperson of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and former General Director of the "EuroBelarus" INGO. In the morning of 4 August, representatives of the State Security Committee (KGB) broke into Ulad's home, conducted a search, seized all his equipment, and detained him for 12 hours. He was released on a non-disclosure agreement the same day. On 5 August, he was summoned for interrogation to the Investigative Committee, a subsidiary body to the KGB.

Ulad is a prominent voice in the Belarusian civil society to which he has dedicated his career since 1994. Over the years, he has contributed to ensuring the active participation of Belarusian civil society organisations in the Eastern Partnership initiative. Since 2009, Ulad served as a co-chair of the EaP CSF Steering Committee (2010-2011; 2016-2017) and led the activity of the Belarusian National Platform within the Forum (2009-2011; 2015-2017).

Three other members of EuroBelarus were also detained on 4 August including **Uladzimir Matskevich**, philosopher and political writer, who contributed to the creation of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum in the early stages of the EaP policy and advocated for the participation of the National Platforms in the multilateral track of the policy. He is also the founder of the EaP CSF Belarusian National Platform. Beside his active contribution to the EU-Belarus relations within the Eastern Partnership framework, Uladzimir has been at the forefront of many recent breakthrough initiatives of the Belarusian civil society including Charter 97, the "Flying University" (Лятучы ўніверсітэт), the International Consortium "EuroBelarus", and the social movement promoting the independence of Belarus "Fresh Wind" (Свежы вецер).

In similar unlawful circumstances, **Tatsiana Vadalazhskaya**, sociologist and coordinator of the Flying University, and **Oksana Shelest**, sociologist and manager of research projects at the Flying University, have also been arrested. Searches were conducted in their homes, as in Matskevich's, on 4 August. However, while **Oksana Shelest** was released late at night the same day on a non-disclosure agreement, **Uladzimir Matskevich and Tatiana Vadalazhskaya** are still being held in a detention centre on Akrestsin Street (Окрестина) on fabricated and politically motivated charges - something every targeted civil society activist or organisation are faced with.

The Steering Committee of the EaP CSF condemns in the strongest possible terms the relentless and despicable assaults on civil society activists conducted by Belarusian authorities today and every day since 11 August 2020.

This extremely preoccupying situation calls for urgent response from all stakeholders. Without any end in sight for the spiral of violence Belarusian authorities are caught in, there will only be further destruction - and the regime has shown national borders will not stop them. Based on this assessment, the Steering Committee of the EaP CSF calls on:

- The Belarusian authorities to immediately release all unlawfully detained civil society activists, human rights defenders and journalists, including **Uladzimir Matskevich and Tatsiana Vadalazhskaya**; pending their release, they should be protected from torture, any inhuman or degrading treatment, and should have unconditional access to justice, legal and medical assistance;
- The Belarusian authorities to put an end to the state-sponsored purge of the civil society systematically pursued since August 2020 and to stop the illegal arrests and searches targeting activists and free thinkers like **Uladzimir Matskevich and Tatsiana Vadalazhskaya and many others**;
- The international community to promptly and severely sanction and stand up against the multiple and incessant human rights and international law violations committed by Lukashenka's regime;
- EU member states to ensure political exiles have simplified access to political asylum and the capacity to safely conduct their activities from there;
- The EU to keep funding and supporting initiatives led by and involving the Belarusian civil society, thus securing one of the last few ties the Union has with Belarus while upholding EU norms and values;
- To the EU, EaP and international NGO community to stand by the Belarusian civil society cause, advocate against the shrinking space for civil society in Belarus and endorse the calls for immediate release of activists from unjust imprisonment.

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