

## Senior Officials meeting on Belarus

### Welcome remarks by Nikolai Kvantaliani, Belarusian National Platform of the EaP CSF

*Brussels, 5 April 2022*

Dear colleagues, EU institutions and member states representatives, Ms. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, ladies and gentlemen,

I am honored to speak on behalf of the Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnerships Civil Society Forum and share our observations and recommendations with you. Currently, there are **1108 political prisoners in Belarusian prisons**, including activists, journalists, human rights defenders as well as ordinary citizens, who have voiced their criticism of the Lukashenka regime. Unfortunately, this number has been increasing on a daily basis.

Thousands were affected by the regime's brutal repression, and the only choice we have left is either to leave the country or endure long terms in prison for our civic position. Not only speaking against torture and repressions that are happening in Belarus can get you behind bars, but also speaking against Russian war in Ukraine. Having such a position now is recognised as a threat to the state and is heavily prosecuted. For this reason, many citizens have emigrated just to avoid being forced to help the regime in its war against Ukraine. Civil society has been hit very hard in Belarus as the majority of independent civil society organizations were de-registered and many organisations and colleagues had to relocate abroad.

The developments in Belarus and Ukraine are interconnected. Do not forget that the regimes of Lukashenka and Putin have similar roots that lead to ugly, bloody and aggressive consequences. In 2020, Belarusians were beaten, tortured, killed and raped in prisons and detention centres. In 2022, we have seen images from villages and cities of Ukraine that were previously occupied by Russians, where innocent civilians have been tortured and murdered, lying with their tied hands. Women's bodies partly burned after being raped. We are victims of our own government and Ukrainians of a foreign one, but the cause for the attack is the same - to squash the freedom and values of democratic societies.

Nevertheless, we can see great solidarity between Belarusians and Ukrainians. Belarusians were among the first who reached the Polish-Ukrainian border to support Ukrainian refugees. Belarusians have support crowdfunding initiatives (like #BySol initiative) and formed the Kastus Kalinouski Battalion to jointly fight for our common freedom. For many Belarusians who found shelter in Ukraine, it was a traumatizing experience to become a political refugee for the second time, having had to leave Ukraine and face problems in many EU and EaP countries due to lack of proper paperwork. These issues are being solved, but other challenges

still need to be addressed. We have to make sure a correct picture of Belarusian refugees escaping both regimes is painted in the public space and further discrimination is prevented.

Turning to the purpose of this meeting - supporting Belarusian civil society in order to preserve it and preparing the ground for future democratic development should be strategic, long-term, flexible and designed to ensure ownership of Belarusian stakeholders over the planning and implementation of large scale programmes and projects.

A lot will be presented and discussed today but I would like to underline the following points:

- **Ongoing support to political and politically motivated prisoners** in Belarus is needed, including the support to their families.
- **Legal support for re-establishing Belarusian civil society organisations** in the neighboring countries is needed.
- It is necessary to recognise Belarusian CSOs registered abroad as Belarusian CSOs and fully include them into the considerations on **absorption capacity** and planning on allocation of resources.
- **Accessibility** of funds should be a priority, especially for newly created initiatives and remaining organisations in Belarus, but as well for reallocated initiatives and organisation.
- **Activities in Belarus are still possible** and demand a certain level of flexibility and security, however, those who are implementing them face increasing pressure from the authorities.
- **Physical and digital security** should be a priority for interaction with Belarusian activists on the ground.
- Due to relocations of Belarusian CSOs and their presence across the bordering regions, **safe implementation of the meetings and project activities demands more mobility and consequently more resources for travel.** Related to this fact is also a need to ensure compliance with COVID-19 vaccination.
- Continuous, **enduring support for CSOs and new initiatives** is needed in order to maintain a long-term impact. The funds cannot decrease when political pressure decreases. More is possible to be done when repressions ease. Hence endurance from donors is needed to maintain the **resilience** of Belarusian civil society and **sustain the potential for the future.**
- **Belarusian CSOs co-ownership** over programmes and projects is important. In general, the course of EU support based on substantial **Belarusian ownership** empowers and increases sustainability of results.
- **Anchor** support around institutions based in safe countries (abroad), such as Belarusian independent media, educational establishments (university), CSOs based and registered abroad for increased sustainability during high waves of repression.
- **Consider supporting non-standard projects and one-off events**, such as large cultural events (movies, concerts) that could encourage people and bring alternative energy and impulses to Belarusian public space but are difficult to support within existing programmed activities.
- **And lastly on the flexibility of support for donors, it is key to understand** the complex and difficult conditions inside the country - for



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example, results-based reporting is preferable because detailed financial reports that would expose beneficiaries to an increased danger of repressions do not have to be submitted.

Thank you very much for your attention. I am looking forward to the upcoming discussions today.