

## **Speech by Tatsiana Khomich, Coordination Council representative for political prisoners, on the situation in Belarus**

As of today, 890 people have been recognized as political prisoners in Belarus. According to human rights defenders, more than 1,500 people are being prosecuted in politically motivated criminal cases. It is difficult to give the exact number, one of the reasons is that some relatives do not turn to human rights defenders being afraid of publicity and even more pressure.

The Belarusian authorities are finding new and new reasons for repression. The most common tool of repression today is criminal prosecution under defamatory articles: for insulting the president, government officials, judges. Sentences on these charges can reach up to three years of restriction of freedom.

Repressions against employees of independent media are widespread and have especially intensified since July 2021. As a result, the work of many journalists in Belarus became impossible and they were forced to leave the country. More than 60 media representatives are under criminal prosecution, more than 30 of them are in custody or in prison.

Increasingly often, the information products of mass media, websites and bloggers are massively recognized as extremist with the prohibition of their distribution. The number of such “extremist” resources is growing every day and they come to include everything that contains at least a slightest criticism of the authorities. The Belapan news agency, which had worked for 30 years, was even recognized as an “extremist formation”. Its current director and editor-in-chief Irina Levshina and former director Dmitry Novozhilov have been in custody since mid-August 2021. They face up to seven years in prison.

Imagine that commenting, reposting and liking materials recognized as “extremist” is regarded as propaganda of extremism. Recently, a married couple spent more than 100 consecutive days in custody for exchanging private messages with materials of telegram channels recognized as extremist. They were tried nine times. The term “re-detention” appeared in Belarusian usage. It is used in relation to people who were released and immediately detained again.

“Any further tightening of sanctions will lead to the situation when civil society will cease to exist,” Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei said in April 2021. And the actions of the authorities didn’t wait long to follow. Since July 2021, 275 public organizations in Belarus have been liquidated or are in liquidation status, including the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the Belarusian PEN Center, whose leader is the Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich.

The official liquidation of organizations does not lead to their closure, but only to delegalization. Many projects were suspended, many NGO representatives and experts had to leave the country, look for alternative forms of activity and financing, publicize their work in the media much less.

For more than a year, the Belarusian society has been living under constant unprecedented pressure and repression. Many were forced to leave. People who left are largely those who participated in protest actions, who take part in numerous protest initiatives and public organizations, and have left in order to be able to continue their work.

A belt of countries where Belarusians mostly leave for has formed around Belarus – Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia. And it is not by chance that Belarusians choose neighboring countries. Many of us fled being confident that it would not be for long, that we would return home soon. And we want to return home to Belarus.

The suspension of Belarus' participation in the Eastern Partnership program terminates a number of programs aimed at the development of civil society, which primarily affects ordinary citizens. The Belarusian society should not suffer from the actions of the Belarusian authorities and should not be deprived of existing mechanisms of development. The Eastern Partnership framework has always stipulated not only participation of the states, but of other stakeholders (civil society, private sector, IFIs, international organisations).

The sanctions rhetoric puts pressure on Lukashenka and his entourage, the impact of the sanctions has a delayed effect and is not so obvious to the society yet. At the same time, the Belarusian society should feel support not only from the sanctions' influence. A positive agenda on Belarus from the EU is also important right now, without waiting for Belarus to embark on the path of democratization. And the Eastern Partnership program is the right tool for this.

The main principle underlying the relations with Belarus today is not in freezing Belarus' membership in the Eastern Partnership programme until the democratic transformations are complete, but to use the Eastern Partnership tools to advance such transformations. Even in the current setting, the Eastern Partnership tools provide the possibility for creating better conditions for transformations in the Belarusian society. It is already possible to create pivotal 'growth points' and missing elements for the future reforms which can be scaled up into systemic country-wide changes under more favorable conditions.

General approach to Belarus' membership in the Eastern Partnership should be based on the principle of maximum integration of the nongovernmental actors in the format where their participation can compensate for the absence of the state and result in specific benefits for the Belarusian society. Interaction can be through direct support of the nongovernmental actors (first of all, the civil society and the private sector) including those outside Belarus and horizontal partnerships between the actors within Belarus and their various counterparts outside the country.

We consider it reasonable to launch Core Initiatives for Belarus which would be based on the existing toolset and the initiatives available with the Eastern Partnership (investments in Resilient, sustainable and integrated economies, Environment and climate resilience, Digital transformation, Accountable institutions, Rule of Law and Security, Resilient, fair and inclusive societies). Such Core initiatives may be:

1. Model institutions for the future. Prepared out-of-the-box solutions which would serve as an example for such future institutions as secondary school, business activities, development of digital economy and administration, public administration forms, for ensuring transitional justice and restoring the rule of law, for cultural transformations.
2. Education and further training. Reforms are impossible without the people who make them. It is necessary to establish a system of targeted professional training in various fields (business, green economy, education, culture, etc.).
3. Civil society. Reforms should have clear 'owners' in the form of coalitions of public stakeholders. A civil society support programme should facilitate coalitions of various public subjects claiming the role in determination of the directions and policies in certain spheres.
4. Media programme. The task of such a media programme is in keeping the change-oriented majority of the political citizens of Belarus and preparing them for reforms.

We understand that time must pass for the level of repression to subside and for Belarus to embark on the path of transformation. But we also know that democracy is a process. The sooner we start using a systematic approach to democratize society, the more Belarusians inside and outside the country will be involved in it at the initial stage, the faster the transformation will begin. And we ourselves want to become these changes.