

29 March 2018

Belarus: Human rights defenders arrested

On 25 March 2018, six human rights defenders **Maxim Kovalev**, **Tatyana Mastykina**, **Andrei Krechko**, **Anna Sakhankova**, **Anastasia Vasilchuk** and **Nasta Loiko**, all members of **The Human Rights Centre “Viasna”** and the **Belarusian Helsinki Committee**, were arrested in Minsk near Yakub Kolas Square for observing a public event. The arrests occurred during a banned opposition march in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Belarusian People’s Republic of 1918.

The Human Rights Centre '[Viasna](#)' works to promote human rights and provides practical assistance to civic initiatives for the legal defense of citizens. It also conducts research into the state of civil society and legal defense in Belarus.

On 25 March 2018, Maxim Kovalev, Anastasia Vasilchuk, Tatyana Mastykina, Andrei Krechko, Anna Sakhankova and Nasta Loiko were arrested, along with 60 others, for observing a banned opposition march. The observers were mandated by the Belarusian Helsinki Committee as observers and were wearing badges and wristbands clearly identifying them as such.

The march was due to take place at 12.00 am and the observers arrived at 11.47 am via the exit from the metro on the corner of no. 49 Nezavisimosti street (opposite Yakub Kolas Square). A law enforcement officer in plainclothes demanded that the observers go to the minibus to have their documents checked. The defenders presented their passports and certificates declaring them to be public observers but they were arrested.

The public observer, Anastasia Vasilchuk, was brought to Pervomaisky police department and Maxim Kovalev, Tatyana Mastykina, Andrei Krechko, Anna Sakhankova, Nasta Loiko were detained at the Department of Internal Affairs at Sovetskyi police station.

All six human rights defenders were later released, but charged under Art. 23.34 of the Administrative Code for "Participation in an unauthorised mass event".

Anna Sakhankova was released without explanation and without drafting the protocol.

Tatiana Mastykina was the last released from Sovetskyi police station and received an additional charge of “disobedience to police officers”, along with “participation in an unsanctioned rally.”

The trial was announced for the next day, 26 March 2018 at the Soviet District Court but the hearings was cancelled without setting an alternative date for the hearing.

On 25 March, police officers detained at least 110 people in relation to the demonstration. At least 12 people in Minsk were charged under Art. 23.34 of the Administrative Code (violation of the procedure for organising and holding mass events), which would allow for them to be placed in administrative detention.

Last year over 700 people were arrested in relation to the annual 25 March opposition march, prompting warnings from the European Union, which had lifted sanctions on Belarus after Lukashenko freed imprisoned opposition politicians in 2016. The offices of Viasna were raided while a training on human rights was taking place for human rights defenders. Fifty-eight observers, including Front Line Defenders Protection Coordinator, Masha Chichtchenkova, human rights defenders and Viasna staff were detained, put onto a bus and brought to Pervomaiski district police station.

Front Line Defenders strongly condemns the mass detentions of civil society and human rights defenders in Belarus. We call on the authorities to immediately drop all charges for peacefully exercising the right to freedom of assembly in Yakub Kolas Square in Minsk, and reiterate our ongoing support for and solidarity with human rights defenders in Belarus.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Belarus to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally drop all charges against Maxim Kovalev, Tatyana Mastykina, Andrei Krechko, Anastasia Vasilchuk, Anna Sakhankova and Nasta Loiko, as it is believed that they are solely motivated by their legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
2. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Belarus are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.