

## JOINT PRESS RELEASE

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### Belarus: Imminent verdict in the trial against Viasna's leaders

**Paris-Geneva, March 2, 2023 – Tomorrow, the Leninsky District Court in Minsk is expected to hand down its verdict in the case of Viasna leaders Ales Bialiatski, Valiantsin Stefanovich and Uladzimir Labkovich. On the eve of the verdict, the signatory organisations reiterate their calls to release the human rights defenders and drop all charges against them.**

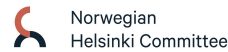
On March 3, 2023, the Leninsky District Court in Minsk will rule on the politically motivated case against the head of Viasna and Nobel Peace Prize laureate **Ales Bialiatski**, his deputy and FIDH Vice-President **Valiantsin Stefanovich**, and Viasna's lawyer **Uladzimir Labkovich**. After over a month of unfair trial and more than a year and a half of arbitrary detention, hope for justice is slim.

On February 9, 2023, Prosecutor Aliaksandr Karol requested the court to sentence Ales Bialiatski to 12 years' imprisonment, Valiantsin Stefanovich to 11 years and Uladzimir Labkovich to 9 years. **Zmitser Salauyou**, another Viasna's member and defendant in this case, who is tried *in absentia*, faces 10 years' imprisonment. The prosecutor further demanded a fine of 185,000 Belarusian rubles (approximately 68,000 Euros) to be imposed on each of the defendants.

### Lawless authorities have played a parody of justice against human rights defenders

"The position of the Prosecutor's Office in the case of our friends and colleagues is the epitome of lawlessness by the Belarusian authorities. Draconian prison terms and fines, even by the abysmal standards of the profoundly compromised Belarusian judiciary, is an ordeal for the defendants and their families" said Pavel Sapelka, acting member of the Viasna board. "These shameful repressive practices against human rights defenders require decisive actions by key international actors" he added.

Bialiatski, Stefanovich and Labkovich have been arbitrarily detained since July 14, 2021, as part of a broader crackdown on Belarusian civil society following the highly contested August 2020 presidential elections. They were initially detained and held for 14 months on bogus



charges of "tax evasion" (Part 2 of Art. 243 of the Belarus Criminal Code), but they are now on trial on trumped-up charges of "smuggling" (Article 228.4 of the same Code) and "financing of group actions grossly violating public order" (Article 342.2 of the same Code). These new charges were only filed against them in September 2022, leaving little time for the defendants and their lawyers to prepare a new defence strategy.

**Over 10 years in jail are expected in retribution for rightful human right work by the defendants**

Bialiatski, Stefanovich and Labkovich are prosecuted in reprisal for carrying out legitimate human rights work. Prosecution deemed illegal such activities as: assisting arbitrarily detained participants in peaceful protests, paying lawyers' fees, organising independent election monitoring, and continuing Viasna's activities after its formal liquidation.

The trial of Bialiatski, Stefanovich and Labkovich, as well as the preceding investigation period, were marred with multiple violations of human rights and fair trial standards: in the courtroom, the three defendants were handcuffed and held in a cage; the case materials and the hearings were in Russian, while the first language of the defendants in which they communicate is Belarusian; the defendants were not given sufficient time to familiarise themselves with all the case file; and no independent media or independent observers were allowed into the courtroom, to name just a few.

The signatory organisations strongly condemn once again the criminal prosecution of Ales Bialiatski, Valiantsin Stefanovic and Uladzimir Labkovich and reiterate their call to the Belarusian authorities to release them immediately and unconditionally, to drop all charges against them, and to end the judicial harassment against all human rights defenders in the country.



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1. ACAT Suisse
2. Amnesty International
3. ARTICLE 19
4. The Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House
5. Campax
6. Civil Rights Defenders
7. European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE)
8. FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
9. Freedom House
10. Front Line Defenders
11. Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights
12. Human Rights House Foundation
13. Human Rights Watch
14. The International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI)
15. Libereco - Partnership for Human Rights
16. Netherlands Helsinki Committee
17. Norwegian Helsinki Committee
18. Östgruppen - Swedish initiative for Democracies and human rights
19. Right Livelihood
20. World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
21. People in Need