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and

**THE PRESIDENCY OF IRELAND OF THE COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS
OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE**

International round table

**CIVIL SOCIETY:
EMPOWERMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

**Council of Europe, Strasbourg
Tuesday, 13 September 2022**

(Hybrid format)

**ONLINE PRESENTATION
SHARING EXPERIENCE**

by

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It is my privilege to make a contribution to the conference. I would like to give a general overview of the situation with freedom of association in Belarus. Upon which, I will use the example of my organization to show the repressions against NGOs and human rights defenders.

The human rights situation has always been complicated in Belarus, with the authorities ignoring and failing to ensure human rights, no systemic changes being introduced and political depressions never ending. Many rights, including freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly, have been severely restricted at the level of national law. And the pressure has been extremely high in actual life. Yet, after the elections in August 2020, we have faced unprecedented repressions and a political and social crisis. And now the situation is getting worse every day. According to the monitoring conducted by Belarusian experts with support of ECNL <https://csometer.info/countries/belarus>, in the recent 2 years, the environment in Belarus, which had already created exceedingly adverse conditions for the exercise of freedom of association, including the rights to freely establish, participate in, and freely withdraw from an association, has deteriorated even further.

Freedom of association has been all but eliminated in the country, with the registration of new independent Civil Society Organizations practically suspended, hundreds of CSOs being under liquidation, citizens forced to join pro-government organisations, and a number of civil activists and CSO representatives being subjected to criminal proceedings as a result of abuse of powers by investigative authorities.

Belarusian citizens are made to join 'pro-government' public associations known as GONGOs. These include the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM), the 'Belaya Rus' public association, and trade unions affiliated to the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus. According to an opinion poll conducted by the Baltic Internet Policy Initiative and the Office for European Expertise and Communication (2019; published in 2020), about twenty-five per cent of people are pressed into participating in social activities. Some people willing to leave these GONGOs or trade unions are impeded to do so, including by means of unlawful demands, for example, requirements to complete special forms, or threats of dismissal, or just because they are unaware of the ways to do it. State-supported associations claim comprehensive membership in their social groups based on the corporatist principle: the Belarusian Society of Veterans claims to have 2.5 members (that is, all Belarusian citizens of advanced age), the Belarusian Red Cross claims to have around 1.4 million members, and the Pioneer Organisation claims to bring together 660,000 children and teenagers (again, all citizens of Belarus of the relevant age). Foreigners in Belarus are still restricted in their ability to form associations under the law. Unregistered associations are also banned, and the violation of this rule involves criminal liability which was imposed anew by Article 193 of the Criminal Code. The state interferes directly with CSOs, including under the pretext of anti-money laundering measures and extremism countering activities. In July 2021, the Belarusian authorities publicly announced a massive campaign to liquidate 'unwanted' CSOs which affected nearly twenty per cent of all CSOs. That included the forced dissolution of the most reputable and prominent CSOs, arrests of their leaders and searches carried out at dozens of CSOs. In this context, many CSOs were forced to move abroad for security reasons as well as for the sake of their further activities.

According to the monitoring conducted by Lawtrend and OEEC: over the past year, 857 organizations have been liquidated or are in the process of liquidation in Belarus. At the same time, the total number of NGOs in the country does not exceed 3,500. Liquidation most often occurs by force by a court decision, but self-liquidation is also widespread. The decision on self-liquidation is made by organizations primarily due to the unfavorable legal environment, the general socio-political situation in the country, and also often under pressure from the authorities <https://www.lawtrend.org/freedom-of-association/godovshhina-chyornogo-dnya-belarusskih-ogo>.

Today, Belarusian NGOs need partnership, cooperation and funding more than ever. They work a lot, both with the society in Belarus and with those who left Belarus for various reasons.

Persecutions exemplified by *Viasna* Human Rights Center case

Viasna was founded in 1996 and deregistered as early as in 2003 by the decision of the Supreme Court for its active efforts in defending and promoting human rights in Belarus. The UN Human Rights Commission issued 2 decisions on the violation recommending that the organization be re-registered, but nothing has changed since then. Throughout *Viasna*'s history, its staff and volunteers have encountered a variety of reprisals, including detentions, fines and searches, some of them being fired from work or expelled from universities. In 2011, the leader of the organization, Ales Bialiatski, was arrested and spent 3 years in prison on a fabricated political case, allegedly for tax violations.

On September 6, 2022, a verdict was passed on the coordinator of the ERC Marfa Rabkova and *Viasna* volunteer Andrei Chapiuk. Marfa was sentenced to 15 years in prison, Andrei to 6. Their crime is their work in a human rights organization, helping people and coordinating volunteers. Human rights defenders in Belarus face constant threats; this week, my colleague Vladimir Tseliapun from the small town of Mazyr received 10 days of arrest for reposting on Facebook. And the situation is aggravated even further. A total of 7 *Viasna* members are now under arrest on criminal charges. Behind bars are the chairman of the organization, the vice president and the legal coordinator. They are accused of not registering the organization and not paying taxes as registered taxpayers. This is the height of cynicism from the authorities, in my opinion. In addition, they are kept in appalling conditions: a shower once a week, a 1 hour walk, overcrowded cells, poor quality food, lack of sunlight, lack of qualified medical care. Despite the repressions, we continue our work. Just like other Belarusian democratic NGOs.

I kindly ask everyone to write cards of support to my colleagues. Today, solidarity is very important, it is our weapon of choice.