



## EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

### **Stop Repression and Threats – Solidarity with Belarusian Civil Society**

#### **Statement by the Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum**

The Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum is dismayed at the unprecedented scope of crackdown on Belarusian citizens and civil society leaders ahead of the presidential election on 9 August 2020. We express solidarity with our colleagues and friends from the Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum<sup>1</sup> and call on the international community to demand from the Belarusian authorities freedom for all arbitrarily detained persons and renunciation of the practice of threats and repression.

As the day of the presidential election is approaching, the rhetoric and actions of the Belarusian authorities are becoming more daring and aggressive<sup>2</sup>.

It all started with preventing the registration of alternative candidates, defamatory campaigns against them and ended in their arrests. When residents of many Belarusian cities and towns took to the streets in the protection of their voting rights, mass-scale brutal detentions began – at the “solidarity chains” on 18-21 June, on the Independence Day on 3 July, during the protests on 14 July and other peaceful actions. As of 20 July 2020, the number of detainees has reached at least 1,140 persons<sup>3</sup>, among them dozens of professional journalists. 25 persons out of them have been put in jail and declared by Belarusian human rights defenders as political prisoners.

What is more, the incumbent President Aliaksandr Lukashenka publicly make allusions that a more severe repression might come. For example, while visiting the 5th Special Forces Brigade on 24 July 2020, he referred to the armed forces as a last resort option<sup>4</sup>. And this is not the only remark of that kind President Lukashenka made in recent days<sup>5</sup>.

The Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum calls on the Belarusian authorities to stop their infamous practices of intimidation, to release all arbitrarily detained persons and to start a broad dialogue with Belarusian society.

We are asking international institutions, including the European Union, the Council of Europe and others, to thoroughly observe the human rights situation ahead and after the presidential election in Belarus and to react to any breaches in this field.

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<sup>1</sup> See the statement “On the Current Electoral Situation in Belarus” by the Belarusian National Platform dated 21 July 2020: <http://npbelarus.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/07.21.pdf> (in Russian)

<sup>2</sup> See <https://belsat.eu/en/tag/detention> for the chronicle

<sup>3</sup> See also <https://elections2020.spring96.org/be/news/98460> (in Belarusian)

<sup>4</sup> See <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-modern-wars-are-triggered-by-street-protests-131994-2020>

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-to-preserve-the-country-is-the-overriding-task-132080-2020>

Despite the fact that neither the PACE mission, nor the representatives of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) come to observe the presidential election in Belarus, we ask the ODIHR to legally assess the election campaign *in absentia*, including the lack of a timely invitation to the country and the impact of the absence of independent observers<sup>6</sup>.

Finally, we appeal to the CIS election observation mission to execute their work in a fair and a transparent manner and to issue an independent and evidence-based final report at the end of the election campaign.

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**The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum** was established in 2011 by non-governmental organisations as a permanent common platform. At the moment, 183 NGOs from Russia and the European Union are members or supporters of the Forum. It aims at development of cooperation of civil society organisations from Russia and EU and greater participation of NGOs in the EU-Russia dialogue. The Forum has been actively involved, inter alia, in the questions of facilitation of visa regime, development of civic participation, protection of the environment and human rights, dealing with history and civic education.

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<sup>6</sup> See [www.osce.org/odihr/elections/457309](http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/457309)