



29 May 2017

To Permanent Representatives of Member and Observer States of the UN Human Rights Council:

Excellency,

**We, the undersigned international human rights organizations, urge your delegation, and the United Nations Human Rights Council, to support the renewal of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus under Item 4.**

Following a recent wave of repression against popular discontent exposing the continued gravity of Belarus' human rights situation, and its continued non-cooperation with international human rights mechanisms, all Human Rights Council member and observer states should call on Belarus to return to engagement and agree to adopt a robust policy of domestic human rights reform. To achieve this Human Rights Council members should vote in favor of a resolution renewing the mandate of the Special Rapporteur.

The Special Rapporteur on Belarus concluded his 2016 report to the Human Rights Council by indicating that “no substantial changes in the repressive legal framework were discernible, despite repeated recommendations made by numerous United Nations human rights mechanisms on amending domestic laws to bring them into line with international human rights standards”.<sup>1</sup> Since the Human Rights Council adopted its latest resolution renewing the mandate of the Special Rapporteur, there has been no systematic improvement in the human rights situation in Belarus. On the contrary, all the legislative and systemic restrictions on freedom of expression and association remain in place, and the crackdown on peaceful protests in March 2017, the largest protests since the 2010 Presidential election, confirms the absence of improvement to the human rights situation in the country.

Peaceful protests erupted throughout the country in February and March 2017. Several thousand people peacefully took to the streets in Minsk, Mahiliau, Hrodna, Vitsebsk and other cities, including on Freedom Day on 25 March 2017, to oppose Presidential Decree No. 3 that introduced a tax on unemployment. In response, police used force to repress protesters and detained hundreds solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of assembly and expression. Those detained included opposition members, journalists, and human rights defenders. The majority were later released after several hours of interrogations and intimidation. Of those formally arrested on March 25-26, 177 people were convicted of administrative offences, and over 70 of them sentenced to up to 25 days of detention, in poor conditions that could constitute degrading treatment. At least 18 journalists and bloggers were among those detained, while printed newspapers were confiscated, and access to the two independent online media websites charter97 and Belarusian Partisan, operating from abroad, was blocked during the demonstration. Several other opposition and civic activists were arrested prior to protests in order to prevent them from participating in and from observing peaceful protests throughout the country, and released only after the end of the demonstration. The crackdown against peaceful protests held in March 2017 is a stark wake up call to Belarus' international partners that they should be under no illusion about the Government's disrespect for its human rights obligations, which has been repeatedly highlighted by the Special Rapporteur.

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<sup>1</sup> Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, 21 April 2016 (UN doc. A/HRC/32/48), Para 133.

No progress has been made towards the abolition of the death penalty. On the contrary, after an almost 18-month break, executions in Belarus resumed in April 2016 and by the end of 2016 reached the highest number since 2008. The rights of people sentenced to death continue to be violated at all stages of the proceedings and during detention.

The government of Belarus continues to refuse to cooperate with the Special Rapporteur on Belarus. Despite this, the mandate has repeatedly proven to be of critical importance since its establishment in 2012. The Special Rapporteur has provided constant independent monitoring of the situation, and highlighted some worrying trends that had not previously received sufficient attention. His work, in particular the many recommendations he has developed in the course of his mandate, could serve as a roadmap towards genuine reform for the Belarusian authorities. At a time when the international community witnesses a new crackdown on peaceful protesters, independent media and human rights organizations, it becomes even more important to provide full support to this important independent international mechanism dedicated to monitoring human rights in the country.

In light of the above concerns, we urge the Human Rights Council to maintain international scrutiny over the human rights situation in Belarus by renewing the mandate of the Special Rapporteur under agenda item 4 until tangible steps are taken by the government of Belarus, including:

- Full cooperation with UN human rights mechanisms, allowing the current country Special Rapporteur to visit Belarus, and commitment to implement the recommendations of the Special Rapporteur and other UN mechanisms;
- The introduction of a moratorium on the death penalty;
- An end to the harassment of independent or opposition journalists, government critics, and civil society organizations, including by closing politically motivated criminal cases against them, and registering independent human rights organizations and all NGOs that apply for registration;
- A commitment to bring the legislation of Belarus in line with international human rights standards. In particular, to repeal legislation that excessively restricts freedoms of expression, assembly and association, including Article 193.1 of the Criminal Code, which criminalizes participation in the activities of unregistered organizations, and put an end to politically-motivated prosecutions.

By supporting the renewal of the Special Rapporteur's mandate, your delegation would send a strong signal to the Belarusian authorities and civil society that it is committed to human rights progress in the country. We look forward to seeing Belarus move towards a genuine path of human rights reform that would allow human rights defenders, journalists and critics to operate without fear of arrest or harassment. However, that will require the Government to demonstrate specific and concrete progress on each benchmark above.

We thank you for your attention and would welcome opportunities to provide any further information about the human rights situation in Belarus.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration,

Amnesty International  
FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights)  
Human Rights House Foundation  
Human Rights Watch