

22 January 2021

Belarus: human rights defenders Leanid Sudalenka and Maryia Tarasenka detained in Gomel

On 18 January 2021, human rights defender **Leanid Sudalenka** was detained in Gomel as part of an investigation, under article 342 of the Criminal Code, relating to the “organisation and preparation of actions, grossly violating public order, or active participation in them.” On the same day, Leanid Sudalenka’s colleague **Maryia Tarasenka** was also detained and held for three days before being released on 21 January 2021.

[Leanid Sudalenka](#) is a prominent human rights defender, lawyer, and heads the Gomel branch of the Human Rights Centre Viasna (HRC Viasna). He is also an active campaigner and advocate for the abolition of the death penalty in Belarus. Leanid Sudalenka is laureate of the 2018 ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity’ Human Rights Prize of the French Republic. Maryia Tarasenka is a woman human rights defender and a volunteer of the Gomel branch of the HRC Viasna. She has actively opposed the unpopular presidential tax decree against “social parasites”, targeting those who do not have an official job. The Gomel branch of the HRC Viasna provides legal support to victims of human rights violations and helps them to prepare individual complaints to the United Nations Human Rights Committee.

On 18 January 2021, Leanid Sudalenka was detained as he made his way to his office as part of an investigation, under article 342 of the Criminal Code, linking him to “group actions which gravely breach public order”. That morning, immediately after his arrest, the human rights defender was taken to the Investigative Committee’s city office for questioning. He was only permitted access to his lawyer at 5:30 p.m. that evening. During his interrogation that day, an ambulance had to be called to the Investigative Committee’s office to assist Leanid Sudalenka. He is currently being held in the detention centre in Gomel. Later that evening, woman human rights defender Maryia Tarasenka’s house was searched by law enforcement representatives. The woman human rights defender was detained and held in the preliminary detention facility in Gomel for three days until she was released on 21 January 2021.

On 5 January 2021, law enforcement officers searched the “Gomel social-political center”, where the office of the Gomel branch of HRC Viasna is located, as a part of the investigation in the criminal case against activist Uladzimir Niapomniashchykh, who has been accused of “allegedly threatening a prosecutor” under article 366 of the Criminal Code. The search lasted almost 10 hours, during which office equipment, bank cards and over 200 files on cases of repressed participants of peaceful protests in 2020 were confiscated. Human rights defender Leanid Sudalenka was present for the entirety of the raid, after which he was taken to the local Directorate for Combating Organised Crime. He was later released. On the same day, law enforcement officers carried out a separate search of the human rights defender’s home and confiscated his personal laptop.

Another local activist from Rechytsa in the Gomel region, **Taciana Lasica**, was also detained on 21 January at the airport in Minsk and was brought to the preliminary detention facility in Gomel. Taciana Lasica is an activist of the campaign “Tell the Truth”, and she has cooperated with the Gomel branch of the HRC Viasna. Her house was also searched as a part of the investigation in the criminal case against activist Uladzimir Niapomniashchykh.

Members of HRC Viasna have been under pressure since early May 2020. Many local representatives have been arbitrarily detained and subjected to judicial harassment or

administrative arrests. Since the results of the 2020 Presidential elections were announced on 9 August, the [number](#) of acts of reprisal against and judicial harassment of human rights defenders and journalists from the law enforcement representatives in Belarus has increased significantly. On 12 January 2021, human rights defender Andrei Alexandrov was arrested under article 342 of the Criminal Code, part 2, on the suspicion of “education or other preparation of persons for participation in group actions that grossly violate public order, as well as financing or other material support of such activities”.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the detention of human rights defenders Leanid Sudalenka and Maryia Tarasenka. Front Line Defenders believes Leanid Sudalenka and Maryia Tarasenka are being targeted solely as a result of their work in promoting and protecting human rights in Belarus.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Belarus to:

1. Take all necessary measures to ensure the immediate and unconditional release of Leanid Sudalenka and guarantee physical and psychological security and integrity Leanid Sudalenka and Maryia Tarasenka;
2. Immediately stop the criminal proceedings against Leanid Sudalenka as it is believed that the charges are solely motivated by his legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
3. Stop the practice of judicial prosecution of human rights defenders providing help to the detained peaceful protesters;
4. 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.

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