

ADVOCACY INTERVENTION

UIO HUMR 4504 - 2022

MARFA RABKOVA AND YAHOR KANETSKI



PROJECT REPORT

TABLE OF CONTENT

BACKGROUND	3
Case summaries	6
Belarus: The Political and Legal Context	8
ADVOCACY CAMPAIGN	18
Developing a campaign	18
Timeline	21
Social Media Outreach	21
Awareness Raising Efforts	27
Seminar on Academic Freedom and Situation in Belarus	34
REFLECTIONS	40
Reflections about the Project	40
Way Forward and Recommendations for SAR	40
TEAM MEMBERS	42

BACKGROUND

Case summaries

Marfa Rabkova

Marfa Rabkova is a third-year Belarusian student at the International Law and European Union Law program at European Humanities University, in Lithuania, and the coordinator of the Volunteer Service at Human Rights Center VIASNA, Belarus. The 27-year-old, prior to her current role at VIASNA, has consistently been engaged in human rights work and raising her voice against human rights abuses in Belarus. In 2012, she attended the Belarusian State Pedagogical University but could not finish her studies there. The university management disallowed her to continue her studies after she was detained in the last year of her studies when she participated in a small march near the university.¹ While she continued her



human rights activism, in another attempt to continue her studies in the same subject Marfa enrolled at the A. Kuleshov Mogilev State University but was forced to discontinue the same due to political pressure from authorities that hindered her studies and job prospects.²

It was then, in 2017, that her continued efforts to keep learning, led her to join the European Humanities University (EHU) in Vilnius, Lithuania to pursue International Law and European Union Law. Here, at a liberal arts college, she hoped her activism would not become a barrier and be very much in line with her interest in human rights.³ While she continued her studies at EHU, in 2019, Marfa, became part of the VIASNA human rights center, heading the Volunteer Service.⁴ Marfa continued her human rights activism both in her personal and professional life. As part of her human rights activities, Marfa observed peaceful assemblies, took an active part in the independent observation campaign “Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections”, and participated in documenting evidence of torture and other ill-treatment of detained protesters in Belarus.⁵ She would also visit jails and bring prisoners food packages. She was deeply concerned by the lack of information available to prisoners, and the interdiction to meet with

¹ VIASNA “Worried that she was “undereducated”. Student path of Marfa Rabkova” 17 November 2021, <https://spring96.org/ru/news/105732>, (accessed 20 May 2022)

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ VIASNA, “Viasna activist Marfa Rabkova is political prisoner” 21 September 2020. <https://spring96.org/en/news/99623>, (accessed 20 May 2022)

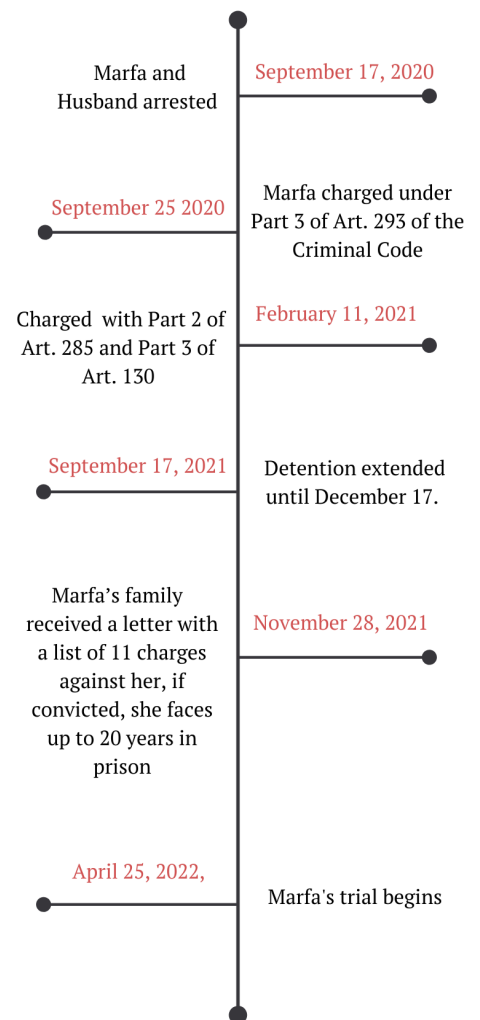
other political prisoners. Through these food packages, she hoped to make them realize they are not on their own and that they won't be forgotten.⁶

In 2020, Marfa monitored nationwide protests calling for Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's resignation and re-election due to the fraudulent manner in which the election was conducted. On September 17, 2020, officers from the 'Main Directorate for Combating Organised Crime and Corruption' (GUBAZIK) followed her and her husband, Vadzim Zharomsky while they were on their way home, forced them to pull over, and arrested them.⁷ Their apartment was searched and their belongings were confiscated. The officers brought Marfa to a detention facility on a charge of 'education or other preparation of persons for participation in mass riots or financing such activities' (Article 293 of Belarus's Criminal Code).

On February 11, 2021, Marfa received an indictment containing two additional charges: 'participating in a criminal organization' (Criminal Code Article 285(2)) and 'inciting racial, national, religious or other social hostility by a group of individuals' (Criminal Code Article 130(3)). The new charges were brought against Rabkova shortly after the national television broadcaster aired a film titled 'TNT of Protest', which alleged the involvement of VIASNA as a whole and Marfa Rabkova, in particular, in terrorist activity.⁸

On November 12, 2021, a local court extended Marfa's pre-trial detention. The appeal against this decision was dismissed on December 14, 2020, by the Partyzanski district court.⁹ A second appeal was dismissed by City Court on December 21, 2020. Another appeal was dismissed by the District court on February 1, 2021. On September 17, 2021, her detention was extended until December 17, 2021.¹⁰ Since then, her detention has been repeatedly extended.

MARFA'S CASE TIMELINE



⁶ OMCT, "Belarus: Marfa Rabkova, imprisoned for documenting human rights violations" 28 May 2021, <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/news/belarus-marfa-rabkova-imprisoned-for-documenting-human-rights-violations> (accessed 20 May 2022).

⁷ VIASNA, "Marfa Rabkova," <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/marfa-rabkova> (accessed 20 May 2022)

⁸ VIASNA, *Criminal Prosecution for Political Reasons Belarus 2020-2021*, (Minsk, 2021) https://spring96.org/files/book/en/criminal_prosecution_for_political_reason_20-21.pdf

⁹ VIASNA "Human rights activist of "Viasna" Marfa Rabkou will remain in custody" 14 December 2020, <https://spring96.org/be/news/100921> (accessed 20 May 2022).

¹⁰ Response of the Republic of Belarus to letter AL BR 8/2021, HRC NONE 2021/SP/89 <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gId=36641>

On November 28, 2021¹¹, Marfa's family reportedly received a letter with a list of eleven charges against her. In total, Marfa faces thirteen charges, and if convicted, she faces up to 20 years in prison.¹² On January 11, 2022, the case file consisting of 160 volumes was transferred to the prosecutor's office.



In April 2022, whilst undergoing her pre-trial detention, VIASNA received information that Marfa has been dealing with several untreated health issues, including severe stomach pains, inflammation in her neck with a cyst on the thyroid, and tooth decay.¹³ The most recent update from VIASNA on April 4, 2022, indicates that Marfa has begun to receive partial treatment for some of her health problems, however, there are still many that are being ignored and untreated. Particularly, no measures have been taken to examine her thyroid levels and her request for a dentist has still not been granted.¹⁴

On April 25, 2022, the trial of cases charged against Marfa along with nine other political prisoners began at the Minsk City Court. Termed a 'high profile case', the day of the trial saw much attention and about 45 people were allowed at first to attend the hearing. The judge, having heard the opinion of all the participants in the process, forbade photography and videotaping in court. Subsequently, the judge granted a petition by the Prosecutor Andrei Buhuk for a closed hearing because he claimed that the materials of the case were of "extremist nature." All attendees were ordered out of the courtroom.¹⁵

¹¹ VIASNA, "Marfa Rabkova," <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/marfa-rabkova> (accessed 20 May 2022)

¹² Scholars at Risk, "Release and drop charges against Marfa Rabkova," 11 February 2022, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/2022/02/release-and-drop-charges-against-marfa-rabkova/>, (accessed 20 May 2022).

¹³ VIASNA "Marfa Rabkova not getting urgent medical aid in jail" 1 April 2022, <https://spring96.org/en/news/107267> (accessed 20 May 2022).

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ VIASNA "The trial of Marfa Rabkova, Andrei Chapiuk and eight other political prisoners to be held behind closed doors" 25 April 2022 <https://spring96.org/en/news/107511> (accessed 20 May 2022).

Yahor Kanetski

Yahor Kanetski is a student of the Faculty of Biology of the Belarusian State University. He is also a member of the Belarusian Student's Association (BSA) and the vice-chairman of the Free Trade Union. From the age of fifteen, he lived and studied alone in Minsk.¹⁶ With a strong sense of justice driving him, Yahor was actively involved in the work of the Belarusian Student's Association (BSA) and his role as the vice-chairman of the Free Trade Union.

After the 2020 Presidential elections in Belarus, mass protests happened all over Belarus to denounce fraudulent presidential elections. The non-violent protests demanded Alexander Lukashenko leave office. Many demonstrations were organized by students and student associations, including BSA¹⁷.



On what came to be known as Black Thursday for Belarusian Students, on November 12, 2020, the police conducted house raids on the homes of different members of the BSA, including Yahor. By the end of the day, eleven are detained, three men and eight women and all of them were taken away to the State Security Committee (KGB) detention centre for questioning¹⁸. Yahor was tackled to the floor, and his phone was confiscated, as well as his computer, money, and documents by the KGB. He was taken into custody and was transferred to the Minsk Pre-trial Detention Center No. 1 waiting for his trial¹⁹. As part of the so-called "Student case", he was charged, among others, for organization and preparation of actions violating public order or active participation in them (Criminal Code Article 342(1))²⁰.

Six months into being locked away in pre-trial detention, the trial against the students including Yahor began on May 14, 2021, at Minsk. With more than 100 people gathered outside the court

¹⁶ We Talk Media, "Project Twelve" <https://wetalk.media/en#people> (accessed 20 May 2022).

¹⁷ Scholars at Risk, "Release Detained Belarusian Students" 27 May 2021 <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/2021/05/release-detained-belarusian-students/> (accessed 20 May 2022).

¹⁸ We Talk Media, "Project Twelve" <https://wetalk.media/en#people> (accessed 20 May 2022).

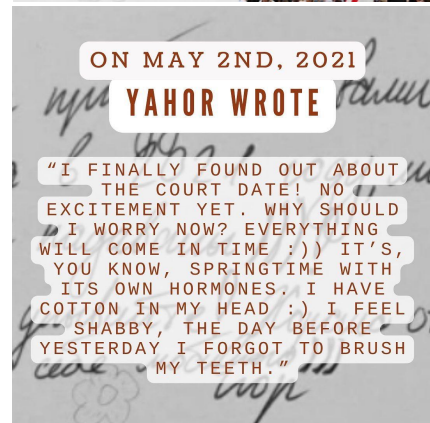
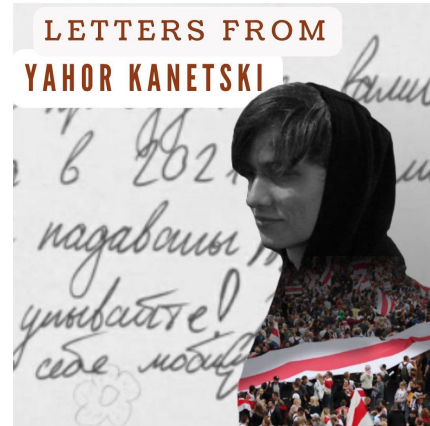
¹⁹ Scholars at Risk, "Release Detained Belarusian Students" 27 May 2021 <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/2021/05/release-detained-belarusian-students/> (accessed 20 May 2022).

²⁰ Belsat, "Up to 2.5 years in jail: Minsk court imposes sentences on defendants in so-called students case" 16 July 2022, <https://belsat.eu/en/news/16-07-2021-up-to-2-5-years-in-jail-minsk-court-imposes-sentences-on-defendants-in-so-called-students-case/> (accessed 20 May 2022).

building for the sitting, only lawyers and up to two relatives were allowed into the courtroom. None of the students, except one, plead guilty to the charges.²¹

On July 17, 2021, The court ordered a two and a half year sentence against students including Yahor, prolonging their imprisonment for one and a half years more.²² Yahor continues to serve his sentence today, in minimum-security penal colony No. 3.

YAHOR'S CASE TIMELINE



From our social media accounts: letters that Yahor has sent from his cell.

²¹ VIASNA, "11 students and university teacher convicted for organizing student protests" 16 July 2021 <https://spring96.org/en/news/104329> (accessed 20 May 2022).

²² We Talk Media, "Project Twelve" <https://wetalk.media/en/year> (accessed 20 May 2022).

Belarus: The Political and Legal Context

The 2020 Presidential Elections and its Aftermath

Termed as an authoritarian state²³ with the worst freedom of expression of record in Europe,²⁴ Belarus has only seen Alexander Lukashenko as its head of state since 1994 following its independence and adoption of a new constitution. Belarus has been historically criticised for its human rights violations and is the only country in Europe that still has the Death Penalty.²⁵ Categorised as 'Not Free' on Freedom House Index since 1996,²⁶ Belarus has also been ranked 98th of 179 countries in the Fragile States Index.²⁷ Over the last two decades, Belarus has seen human rights violations ranging from extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, and large scale violations of freedom of expression and assembly as a matter of policy.²⁸ These primarily aim to suppress any real or suspected dissenting voices and to keep Lukashenko's regime in power²⁹. Several non-governmental organizations and international organizations have criticized human rights violations in the country, a lack of democratic standards and a lack of rule of law. Systematic human rights violations, particularly after the Presidential elections in 2010 led to the adoption of the UN Human Rights Council Resolution 17/24 in 2011 condemning the grave situation in Belarus and mandated the high commissioner for human rights to monitor and report on the situation in the country³⁰.

It was in this context that the 2020 Presidential elections took place. When Alexander Lukashenko decided to seek another term in office in 2020, the situation of human rights further worsened in Belarus. Opposition candidates were not allowed to be registered and in the period leading up to the elections, multiple candidates were arbitrarily arrested and detained.³¹ The period saw multiple peaceful protests which were met with repression at the hands of the state. On 9 August 2020, Lukashenko's victory was announced with supposedly 80% of the vote and this resulted in people taking to the streets and peacefully protesting. The results, given the conditions in which the elections were held, were also denounced largely by the international community, particularly the EU and the US³². In Belarus, the resistance was met with a massive and violent crackdown by the government. In the following weeks,

²³ US Department of State, "2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Belarus," 30 March 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/belarus/> (Accessed 24 May 2022)

²⁴ Reporters without Borders, "Belarus" <https://rsf.org/en/country/belarus> (Accessed 24 May 2022)

²⁵ Human Rights Watch, "Belarus, Events of 2019" <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/belarus> (Accessed 24 May 2022)

²⁶ Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2022: Belarus" <https://freedomhouse.org/country/belarus/freedom-world/2022> (Accessed 24 May 2022)

²⁷ Fragile State Index, "Fragility in the world 2022" <https://fragilestatesindex.org> (Accessed 24 May 2022)

²⁸ The German Marshall Fund of the United States "International Mechanisms for Accountability for Human Rights Violations in Belarus," 18 January 2021, <https://www.gmfus.org/download/article/20317>(Accessed 24 May 2022)

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ UN Human Rights Council, *Situation of human rights in Belarus*, July 14, 2011, A/HRC/RES/17/24

³¹ UN Human Rights High Commissioner (OHCHR), *Situation of human rights in Belarus in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election and in its aftermath*, 4 March 2021, A/HRC/49/71

³² Politico, "U.S. stands with European Union to push for a new election in Belarus" 9 September 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/02/belarus-election-trump-administration-407979>(Accessed 24 May 2022)

Belarusian authorities raided the houses of journalists and activists, arresting and condemning them. The authorities relentlessly targeted anyone who mildly expressed dissent.

A report by the UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) on the situation in Belarus around these elections revealed multiple human rights violations during this period.³³ Peaceful protests were met with disproportionate use of force, arbitrary arrests, denial of procedural rights as well as torture and inhumane treatment³⁴ in violation of multiple international human rights norms. Protests were met with beatings, unnecessary and disproportionate use of crowd control agents, such as kinetic impact projectiles and stun grenades and other forms of use of force while there was no evidence of protests being violent or causing major disruptions to warrant forced dispersal.³⁵ Detention of a large number of people solely for participating in peaceful protests and the circumstances surrounding these arrests lead the OHCHR to conclude that it has “reasonable grounds to believe that there were widespread violations of the prohibition of arbitrary arrest or detention”.³⁶ Furthermore, in violation of the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT) and Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), there was much evidence to show the violence and torture faced by those who were detained.³⁷ Soon after the immediate aftermath of the elections, peaceful demonstrations continued and these too were subjected to violent crackdowns and arrests. This period also saw a crackdown on civil society including journalists, human rights defenders and lawyers. By October 2021, some 270 non-governmental organizations were closed down and by the end of 2021, at least 969 persons were in prison on politically motivated charges.³⁸ As per OMCT, since 2020, the violations have reached the level of crimes against humanity due to their severity and systematic nature.³⁹ As per a report on Human Rights in Belarus at the end of 2021 by VIASNA, “violence, repression, demolition of civil society, creation of an atmosphere of fear have become tools to retain power instead of electoral support.”⁴⁰

Multiple efforts have been made by international bodies to highlight the issues in Belarus and condemn the same. On March 24, 2021, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution condemning the situation in Belarus along with Myanmar.⁴¹ This was rejected by Belarus. Multiple communications have been sent by Special Rapporteurs on the continued human rights abuses in Belarus surrounding the 2020 elections. For instance, on September 7, 2021,

³³ UN Human Rights High Commissioner (OHCHR), *Situation of human rights in Belarus in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election and in its aftermath*, 4 March 2021, A/HRC/49/71

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ OMCT, “Belarus: Global letter in solidarity with the Belarusian civil society” 26 July 2021, <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/statements/belarus-global-letter-in-solidarity-with-the-belarusian-civil-society> (Accessed 24 May 2022)

⁴⁰ VIASNA, “Human Rights Situation in Belarus 2021” https://spring96.org/files/reviews/en/review_2021_en.pdf (Accessed 24 May 2022)

⁴¹ UN Human Rights Council, *Situation of human rights in Belarus*, 25 March 2022, A/HRC/49/L.13, Available at <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/LTD/G22/292/06/PDF/G2229206.pdf?OpenElement>

the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders; the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus; along with other relevant Special Rapporteurs wrote to Belarus. This communication particularly mentioned Marfa's case⁴². However, Belarus responded by rejecting all the allegations and stating that all the arrests and detentions were in accordance with the law.⁴³ On November 26, 2020, the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning the continuous violations of human rights in Belarus⁴⁴.

In 2021, multiple amendments to different provisions of the law were affected further suppressing dissent in any form. In May 2014, the Law on Countering Extremism was amended to make it broader and expand the list of what could be considered extremist activities to warrant criminal prosecution.⁴⁵ Another amendment in 2022 made participation in unregistered NGOs a criminal offence, particularly grave given a high number of NGOs have been forcefully shut down by the government.⁴⁶ All of these changes along with the use of repressive tactics to stifle the voices of their citizens have left Belarus in a worse state as far as its human rights are concerned. As of January 1, 2022, there were at least 969 political prisoners in Belarus, a number that increased by 800 in 2021.⁴⁷

This increase in repression, particularly after the 2020 elections did also inevitably worsened academic freedom in Belarus. This repression was also visible in Marfa's multiple attempts to successfully enrol and continue studies as well as Yahor's arrest along with numerous other students who were targeted together. As per a report from the Belarusian Students' Association and Student Initiative Group until June 2021, at least 492 students were detained and 160 expelled.⁴⁸ There are at least 117 publicly reported cases of various kinds of pressure and intimidation on professors from different universities either directly by law enforcement or through university administration and 12 rectors of universities and academies have been terminated. Concerningly, a new position of "vice-rector on security matters" has been introduced in almost every university to operationalize the mechanisms of repression inside the academic institutions and to monitor the staff.⁴⁹ All of these point toward an extremely hostile environment for academic freedom in Belarus, which is confirmed by a report by Scholars at

⁴² UN Special Procedures, Communication to Belarus, 7 September 2021, AL BLR 8/2021, <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=26612> (Accessed 24 May 2022)

⁴³ Response of the Republic of Belarus to letter AL BR 8/2021, HRC NONE 2021/SP/89 <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gId=36641>

⁴⁴ European Parliament, The continuous violations of human rights in Belarus, in particular, the murder of Raman Bandarenka, 26 November 2020

⁴⁵ UN Human Rights High Commissioner (OHCHR), Situation of human rights in Belarus in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election and in its aftermath, 4 March 2021, A/HRC/49/71

⁴⁶ FIDH, "Belarus: New amendment to the Criminal Code leaves no room for legal human rights activities," 31 January 2022, <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/europe-central-asia/belarus/belarus-new-amendment-to-the-criminal-code-leaves-no-room-for-legal> (Accessed 24 May 2022)

⁴⁷ VIASNA, "Human Rights Situation in Belarus 2021" https://spring96.org/files/reviews/en/review_2021_en.pdf (Accessed 24 May 2022)

⁴⁸ Belarusian Students' Association, 'Repression Against Students: Study Year Results' https://zbsunion.by/en/news/pressure_on_students (Accessed 24 May 2022)

⁴⁹ The Good Lobby, 'Attacks on academic freedom in Belarus State and higher education community must act now' <https://www.thegoodlobby.eu/2021/06/05/attacks-on-academic-freedom-in-belarus-state-and-higher-education-community-must-act-now/> (Accessed 24 May 2022)

Risks where Belarus has the lowest E status under the Academic Freedom Index.⁵⁰ This has also been confirmed by the Free to Think 2021 profile on Belarus by Scholars at Risk which highlights various instances of repression in the academic sector⁵¹.

Diplomatic Relations and Sanctions

Belarus has been cut off from the international community and retains close ties only with a low number of countries, including its closest ally Russia. Due to prevalent human rights violations and authoritarian ruling, neither the EU nor other regional organizations or large democratic states had kept close relations with Belarus. However, after the 2020 elections and a resulting crackdown on the freedom of speech, the right to protest and activists and human rights defenders, few remaining diplomatic and cooperation formats also disappeared.

The EU maintained several cooperation modes with Belarus that are now either on hold or cancelled. For instance, the EU-Belarus Coordination Group was last active in 2019 where parties discussed the abundance of problems with the Belarussian electoral system and human rights record and the EU emphasized the need to deepen the reforms in this regard.⁵²

On the other hand, Belarus also suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership Programme (EPP) in 2021.⁵³ The EPP is a specific direction of EU's European Neighbourhood Policy that governs EU's relations with its Eastern neighbours of "strategic importance."⁵⁴

For Belarus' diplomatic relations, the war in Ukraine and its support was the last straw. For instance, on February 28, 2022 the US suspended its Embassy in Minsk as a response to Belarus' participation and aid to Putin's unsuccessful war efforts against Ukraine.⁵⁵ For its contribution to the unjust and brutal war on Ukraine, Belarus has also been heavily sanctioned and isolated along with Russia by most large states in the world.⁵⁶ As a result, what scarce relations Belarus maintained with the international society, disappeared after the war on Ukraine.

These necessary reactions from the international society, unfortunately, have a toll on the resisting citizens and activists on the ground, including the ones imprisoned for peaceful expression of dissent such as Yahor and Marfa. The current situation of total and absolute

⁵⁰ Global Public Policy Institute and Scholars at Risk 'Free Universities'

https://www.gppi.net/media/KinzelbachEtAl_2021_Free_Universities_AFi-2020.pdf (Accessed 24 May 2022)

⁵¹ Scholars at Risk, "Free to Think 2021: Belarus" <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Free-to-Think-2021-Belarus.pdf> (Accessed 24 May 2022)

⁵² European Union External Action, "EU-Belarus Coordination Group meets in Brussels"

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-belarus-coordination-group-meets-brussels_en, (accessed 30 May 2022)

⁵³ European Council, "EU relations with Belarus", <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/belarus/> (accessed 30 May 2022)

⁵⁴ EU Neighbours East, "EU Policy", <https://euneighbourseast.eu/policy/> (accessed 30 May 2022)

⁵⁵ Foreign Policy, "U.S. Shuttles Embassy in Minsk as Belarus Backs Putin's War",

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/28/belarus-russia-ukraine-putin-war/> (accessed 30 May 2022)

⁵⁶ Peterson Institute for International Economics, "Russia's war on Ukraine: A sanctions timeline",

<https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economic-issues-watch/russias-war-ukraine-sanctions-timeline> (accessed 30 May 2022)

isolation of Belarus means that its brutal regime cannot be influenced through soft diplomatic actions and pressures. For the imprisoned activists this may mean that what little help and aid towards the efforts for their release or improvement of their situation could have mustered before, now is non-existent. The war and subsequent isolation of Belarus has had an impact on our advocacy efforts as well - the team could not make use of any diplomatic channels and international networks for the efforts.

Legal Framework

The judicial system of Belarus is formed in accordance with the constitution of Belarus, with the constitution having the highest legal force followed by legislative acts. The constitution saw two amendments in 1996 and 2004, increasing the power of the presidency over the government and eliminating the term limit for the president. In the aftermath of the 2020 election and the uprising that followed, another referendum to amend the Constitution was held in 2022 to further Lukashenko's term in office, lifelong immunity and allow Belarus to host nuclear weapons. The referendum was carried out in a climate of extreme repression, and the results which accepted the changes were called out as a sham by opposition leaders and the international community.⁵⁷

The constitution prescribes a representative democracy based on rule of law⁵⁸ and that the state protects the rights and freedoms of its citizens.⁵⁹ The constitution guarantees equality before the law⁶⁰, due process and the freedom of expression⁶¹ as well as the freedom of assembly.⁶² Limitations of personal liberty are only permitted in specific instances under the law⁶³ in the interest of national security, public order, the protection of the morals and health of the population as well as the rights and liberties of other persons.

Belarus has ratified and signed some international human rights conventions and treaties. Most relevant in this context are the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the United Nations and the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT). Belarus has also ratified the Optional Protocol to the ICCPR in 1992 which opens it up to the individual complaints mechanism under the purview of the Human Rights Committee.⁶⁴ The Human Right Committee

⁵⁷European Union External Action, "Belarus: Statement by the High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell on the constitutional referendum" 28 February 2021 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belarus-statement-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-constitutional-referendum_en (Accessed 24 May 2022)

⁵⁸ Article 1 of The Constitution of the Republic of Belarus retrieved from <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/by/by016en.pdf>

⁵⁹ Ibid, Article 2

⁶⁰ Ibid, Article 16

⁶¹ Ibid, Article 33

⁶² Ibid, Article 35

⁶³ Ibid, Article 23

⁶⁴ United Nations Treaty Body Database

https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=16&Lang=EN Accessed 24 May 2022)

has considered almost 150 complaints against Belarus.⁶⁵ The state has, however, often ignored the decisions of the committee. While many claims have been brought against the Government of Belarus for violating Article 22 of the ICCPR on the freedom of association, it has been reported that Belarus has not, however, complied with any of the UN Human Rights Committee's concluding observations relating to Belarus's violations of Article 22.⁶⁶

In terms of international judicial bodies, Belarus has not ratified the Rome Statute and it is unlikely that the current government would accept the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court. It also does not recognise the *ipso facto* jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice⁶⁷. It has also not ratified the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and thereby not accepted the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights.

Legal Context

From the above analysis it may seem like, at least on paper the constitution and international conventions Belarus is a signatory to are sufficient to guarantee human rights protection and rule of law in the country. However, much of this remains on paper. As seen from the political analysis, particularly after August 2020, much of these human rights standards guaranteed in the constitution and international commitments have been blatantly ignored. This has resulted in Belarus violating multiple provisions of the ICCPR and the UNCAT as explained above. In particular, three critical issues seem to worsen this disconnect between human rights guarantees and reality. These three issues also have particular significance in the cases of Marfa and Yahor.

1. The Criminal Code and Its Use

In an analysis of relevant provisions of the Criminal Code of Belarus, the Venice Commission stated that while some provisions of the Criminal Code of Belarus, such as Article 293 (Mass disturbances), Article 361 (Calls for acts intended to harm the national security of the Republic of Belarus) or Article 363 (Resisting staff of internal affairs authorities or other persons upholding public order) are not uncommon throughout Europe, in the context of the events in Belarus, much depends on how these provisions are implemented in practice and interpreted by the domestic courts⁶⁸. Particularly, they refer to the compliance with international legal principles of necessity, proportionality and precaution to assess these provisions. As per their analysis, some provisions of the Belarusian Criminal code overlap with other provisions or are

⁶⁵ The German Marshall Fund of the United States “International Mechanisms for Accountability for Human Rights Violations in Belarus,” 18 January 2021, <https://www.gmfus.org/download/article/20317>(Accessed 24 May 2022)

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Venice Commission, “Belarus - Opinion on the compatibility with European standards of certain criminal law provisions used to prosecute peaceful demonstrators and members of the “Coordination Council” 22 March 2021, Opinion No. 1016 / 2020 [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2021\)002-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2021)002-e) (Accessed 24 May 2022)

of a rather vague scope without any supporting interpretative provisions⁶⁹. Particularly, Article 341 (Desecration of buildings and damage to property), which is one of the provisions Marfa is charged with, the commission noted that it had a very broad scope. Further, when such provisions are applied too widely, they penalise conduct that is protected under international standards. Similarly, another provision Article 361 "public calls to (...) violently overthrow the constitutional order" remains manifestly unclear and the provision seems to be used against non-violent protests which may not meet the international human rights standard. Article 342, which both Marfa and Yahor have been charged with, when results in penalisation of non-violent behaviour where the large-scale demonstration remains peaceful, is impermissible under human rights standards⁷⁰. Thus, the broad scope of provisions of the Criminal Code and the manner in which they have been interpreted results in capturing acts that are protected under international human rights standards.

Common Provisions of the Criminal Code Used to Criminalise Dissent

Article 293. Mass disturbances

1. The organisation of mass disturbances accompanied by physical violence, pogroms, arson, destruction of property or armed resistance to representatives of public authority, – shall be punishable by imprisonment of between five and 15 years.
2. Participation in mass disturbances entailing the direct committing of the acts listed in paragraph 1 of the present article, – shall be punishable by deprivation of liberty of between three and eight years.
3. The training or other preparation of individuals for participation in mass disturbances which are accompanied by the committing of the acts listed in paragraph 1 of the present article, and also the funding of or provision of other material support for such activity – shall be punishable by detention or deprivation of liberty for up to 3 years.

Article 342. Organisation and preparation of acts seriously disrupting public order, or active participation in them

1. The organisation of group acts seriously disrupting public order and associated with flagrant disobedience of the lawful requests of representatives of authority or causing disruption to the work of transport services, companies, institutions or organisations, or active participation in such acts, if there are no constituent elements of a more serious crime – shall be punishable by a fine, or detention, or supervised release for up to three years, or deprivation of liberty for the same period.
2. The training or other preparation of individuals for participation in group acts seriously disrupting public order, and also the funding of or provision of other material support for such activity, if there are no constituent elements of a more serious crime – shall be punishable by detention or deprivation of liberty for up to two years.

Article 361. Appeal to overthrow or change the constitutional order of the Republic of Belarus or to carry out crimes against the government.

1. Public appeal to violent usurpation of power or change to the constitutional order of the Republic of Belarus, or a change of the government, or the carrying out of a terrorist act or sabotage, be it whether the disseminating of materials, containing such incitements – are punishable by limited freedom for a period of up to three years or by imprisonment for the same period
2. Those actions carried out by means of mass information are punishable by a deprivation of freedom for a period of one to five years.

2. Arbitrary Detention and Inhumane Conditions

One of the results of the broad scope provisions of the Criminal Code and its wide interpretation is that it results in arbitrary arrests. As per the OHCHR between May 2020 and May 2021, there were at least 37,00 people who were arbitrarily arrested and detained in Belarus⁷¹, similar to both Marfa and Yahors arrests. Article 9 of the ICCPR prohibits arbitrary arrest or detention and requires that deprivation of liberty be conducted on grounds and in accordance with procedures prescribed by law. "Arbitrariness" includes elements of inappropriateness, injustice, lack of predictability and due process of law, and elements of reasonableness,

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ Venice Commission, "Belarus - Opinion on the compatibility with European standards of certain criminal law provisions used to prosecute peaceful demonstrators and members of the "Coordination Council" 22 March 2021, Opinion No. 1016 / 2020 [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2021\)002-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2021)002-e) (Accessed 24 May 2022)

⁷¹ UN Human Rights High Commissioner (OHCHR), *Situation of human rights in Belarus in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election and in its aftermath*, 4 March 2021, A/HRC/49/71

necessity and proportionality. Further, due to the broad scope and wide interpretation of the provisions of the Criminal Code, legitimate exercise of the rights of freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of assembly, and freedom of association are also criminalised and this is considered arbitrary as per international standards⁷². A case can be made for both Marfa and Yahor that they were exercising their legitimate rights of freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of assembly, and freedom of association and their arrest was arbitrary.

Further, many testimonies of those who got arrested around the same time as Marfa and Yahor also revealed they were denied basic procedural safeguards. They were not informed of the reasons for their arrest nor of the charges against them, were not able to communicate with their relatives who were often denied information about their whereabouts, and were mostly denied medical assistance, even when they were injured, they were not provided with legal assistance, not allowed to read police reports and where beaten or threatened when they asked for their procedural rights to be met.⁷³ The OHCHR also noted a number of people who were arrested were released without being charged after spending up to 72 hours in custody without judicial oversight. Such a period of detention without charge or judicial remand order is blatantly arbitrary and has been identified by the Human Rights Committee as a violation of Article 9 (3) of the ICCPR.⁷⁴

A key procedural issue in both Marfa and Yahor's case along with many others has been the prolonged pre-trial detention. Marfa continues to stay in detention while her trial just started, 20 months since her arrest, while Yahor awaited his trial in pre-trial detention for more than 6 months. Prolonged pretrial detention goes against the presumption of innocence under article 14, paragraph 2 of the ICCPR. Paragraph 3 of article 9 requires that detention in custody of persons awaiting trial shall be the exception rather than the rule.⁷⁵ This also applies to those who have been charged and are awaiting trial such as Marfa. The Human Rights Committee has stated that pretrial detention should not be mandatory and must be based on an individualised determination that it is reasonable and necessary for such purposes as to prevent flight, interference with evidence or the recurrence of crime⁷⁶. Despite this, many in Belarus continue to languish in prison awaiting trial.

As per the OHCHR report, there has been evidence of torture and inhumane treatment during the immediate aftermath of the elections. Both Marfa and Yahor's cases also have elements of this. While much of their experience is unknown, from the facts that are in the public domain, it is known that Yahor was tackled to the floor during his arrest and he faced health issues during detention, while Marfa continues to face untreated health issues and had to face a lot of challenges to get basic care. Delay and denial to access healthcare in prison can be argued to be violations of Article 10 of the ICCPR as well as provisions concerning Medical Services and hygiene under the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ UN Human Rights Committee (HRC), General comment no. 35, Article 9 (Liberty and security of person), 16 December 2014, CCPR/C/GC/35, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/553e0f984.html> [accessed 25 May 2022]

⁷⁶ Ibid

3. Right to Free and Fair Trial, Independence of the Judiciary and Access to Justice

The constitution of Belarus prescribes the separation of powers of the legislature, executive and judiciary and their independence⁷⁷. In a Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, the independence of the judiciary was highlighted to be of a major concern⁷⁸. As per the report, the President has the absolute discretion to appoint and remove judges. The criteria applied while making decisions regarding the appointment of judges remain undisclosed to candidates and the public. Concerns regarding lack of clarity on the law on re-appointment and tenure of judges further undermine the independence of the judiciary.⁷⁹ The judge Marina Arkadievna Fedorova, in the students' case, of which Yahor Kanetski was part of, is responsible for 350+ politically motivated sentences, 2,815+ imposed days of "administrative detention", 17+ years of penal work "Khimia" and fines of over 1,600 €. ⁸⁰ When Marfa's appeal was dismissed her husband for example stated that the court's decision was expected and said "Unfortunately, the courts of the Republic of Belarus are not so free to make their decisions but are guided by opinions about who should sit and who should not."⁸¹

Furthermore it has been observed that many of the hearings take place as closed hearings, with the verdicts lacking key conclusions, reference to evidence and legal reasoning. The orders only contained the operative part of guilt or innocent and the sentence⁸². In its fifth periodic report on Belarus, the Human Rights Committee pointed out its concerns for criminal defendants, who are held in glass or metal cages during trials, required to enter and leave the court in shackles and the failure of Belarus to observe fair-trial guarantees, including the right to a public hearing and access to counsel and respect for the presumption of innocence during the trial⁸³ in violation of Article 14 of the ICCPR.

Although article 62 of the Constitution of Belarus guarantees all persons shall have the right to legal assistance, the activities of lawyers in Belarus are regulated by a wide range of legislative acts, including the Bar and Advocacy Act. As per the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Belarus, the state effectively limits the independence of lawyers by bringing their activities under excessive control of the authorities, particularly lawyers who represent human rights

⁷⁷ Article 1 of The Constitution of the Republic of Belarus

⁷⁸ UNGA, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus", 17 July 2020, A/75/173, (Accessed 24 May 2022)

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ We Talk Media, "Project Twelve" <https://wetalk.media/en/#year> (accessed 20 May 2022).

⁸¹ VIASNA "Human rights activist of "Viasna" Marfa Rabkou will remain in custody" 14 December 2020, <https://spring96.org/be/news/100921> (accessed 20 May 2022).

⁸² VIASNA, *Criminal Prosecution for Political Reasons Belarus 2020-2021*, (Minsk, 2021) https://spring96.org/files/book/en/criminal_prosecution_for_polittical_reason_20-21.pdf

⁸³ UNGA, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus", 17 July 2020, A/75/173, (Accessed 24 May 2022)

defenders, as the authorities reportedly selectively use laws to target such lawyers.⁸⁴ The involvement of authorities can even be seen in the certification process of lawyers where the Ministry of Justice is actively involved. Once given the licence, lawyers can undergo certificate inspection by authorities at any point. This practice of suspending or threatening to suspend a license is used to silence lawyers who work on sensitive cases⁸⁵. Systematic restriction of the freedom of expression of lawyers has led to a situation in which lawyers have to self-censor for fear that their licences may be revoked by the Ministry of Justice. This, also impacts access to lawyers and justice in the country, particularly for human rights activists facing criminal charges, In law, the harassment, intimidation and prosecution of lawyers for their legitimate professional activities contravene principles 14 and 20 of the Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers⁸⁶. As per OHCHR, since the election and as of November 2021, 36 lawyers have been deprived of their licenses either through disbarment or loss of certification, a serious chilling effect on the legal profession and effectively depriving victims of human rights violations of the right to a fair hearing and access to justice.⁸⁷ While all of these issues may not be directly discernible in Marfa and Yahor's case, it is undeniable that the inherent bias and lack of independence of the judiciary affect the right to a free and fair trial of anyone who comes face to face with the criminal justice system in such an environment.

⁸⁴ UNGA, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus”, 17 July 2020, A/75/173, (Accessed 24 May 2022)

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ UN Human Rights High Commissioner (OHCHR), *Situation of human rights in Belarus in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election and in its aftermath*, 4 March 2021, A/HRC/49/71

ADVOCACY CAMPAIGN

Developing a campaign

The very first step of building our advocacy project was to understand the two cases assigned to us better, as well as the political and legal context of Belarus, where the cases are based. During the preliminary meetings, we started exchanging our initial learnings of the case and thoughts on a potential advocacy strategy. From our initial research about the cases, we learnt that the situation in political Belarus was very grim and the cases of Marfa and Yahor were just one of many who were faced with repression. Thus, aiming for release or acquittal as an end goal of our advocacy project would not be a very realistic or achievable goal. Although it is the ultimate ask, we wanted to ensure that the goal of our efforts, which are for a short period, be realistic. We also learnt that there was evidence of international solidarity and support by organisations, official statements and sanctions by international bodies and countries against the state of affairs in Belarus. With regards to our cases, particularly Marfa's case saw solidarity actions by local and international organisations. While there were solidarity actions such as petitions, statements and social media advocacy, it was important for us to know where we fit in within these ongoing efforts and more importantly, what the needs on the ground were. Apart from advocacy and solidarity efforts, an alternative was to also explore if we can contribute material aid such as financial aid for legal support or access to pro- bono lawyers from other parts of the world.

We were also in a very unique position due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the war, the escalation of which coincided with our planning and project development stage. Firstly, at the peak of the escalation of the war, we were apprehensive as to how advocating or raising awareness on a different issue would be perceived and about its effectiveness. Particularly, in terms of advocacy efforts at the European level, who were at the time very closely monitoring and actively trying to help de-escalate the situation. Additionally, given that the Government of Belarus has very openly supported Russia, we were also unsure of how our efforts to advocate for students detained within Belarus would be perceived.

Some Preliminary Questions

- Where do we fit within the international campaign?
- What is the need on the ground?
- Can we contribute materially, such as through financial aid or pro-bono support?
- How to advocate on the issue in light of ongoing war and related humanitarian crises?

In looking for answers to these preliminary questions we spent our next couple of weeks educating ourselves more about the case, mapping existing interventions, and meeting with groups and networks to understand the needs on the ground while also monitoring the ongoing war. Some of our key efforts and learnings in this regard were:

- **Courage movie screening:** As a part of a film festival in Oslo, COURAGE, a movie about the situation in Belarus since August 2020 was screened followed by a panel discussion. The movie screening as well as the panel discussion was very insightful for us. We were able to speak to the panellists including a Belarusian student activist who lives in Bergen, Norway. During the brief chat with her, we were able to talk to her about our initiative and she gave us some valuable insight into the situation in Belarus and possible avenues for our intervention. She also recommended we contact RAZAM, an association of Belarusian diaspora in Norway. The event was supported by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee whom we decided to contact for potential collaboration and support.
- **Meeting with RAZAM:** Our first meeting with RAZAM, an association of the Belarusian diaspora in Norway, was a critical part of our initial planning and project design. RAZAM gave us a very comprehensive insight into the situation on the ground in Belarus, advised us on possible interventions and voiced their experiences and hopes from the international community. From the meeting, we learnt that the situation in Belarus is much more impermeable than we had understood. Intervention in terms of financial aid and legal support seemed to be extremely challenging and almost unrealistic given the surveillance and other rigid application of laws in the country on this. RAZAM highlighted the need to bring forward the voices of the people of Belarus, and their stories and bring awareness to the situation in Belarus. This further encouraged our initial thoughts of organising a panel discussion or seminar bringing together different organisations, experts as well as people from Belarus. RAZAM was also able to give us some ideas as to potential organisations and groups we could contact for this and they extended their support and collaboration on the same. In the context of the war too, RAZAM highlighted that it was important to share the narrative of people within the country who are victims and are fighting the regime and do not support the aggression the state defends.
- **Mapping of social media and other advocacy efforts:** To find our space within the ongoing advocacy and solidarity efforts we also mapped the existing efforts. We were able to look at the endeavours of international organisations as well as local or regional groups. Particularly, we found there were some international networks, organisations as well as the UN special procedures mechanism that actively spoke about the repression in Belarus as well as Marfa's case. We found ongoing petitions and letters that were available online and could be promoted further. We were also able to learn more about the ongoing efforts through a discord channel. We also reviewed the social media campaigning and awareness efforts that existed. Looking at Instagram and Twitter particularly, there was a dearth of information in the English language.

Through these initial efforts, we were able to identify some challenges to our advocacy efforts and at the same time map the gaps and opportunities to guide our advocacy campaign.

Gaps and Opportunities

- More awareness of the issue needed.
- Acts of solidarity and support appreciated.
- Misconception/lack of awareness about situation in Belarus further worsened by war.
- Groups in Norway and internationally, working on the issue can collaborate further.
- Social Media presence on the issue in English language missing.
- Possibility of legal/pro-bono support can be explored.

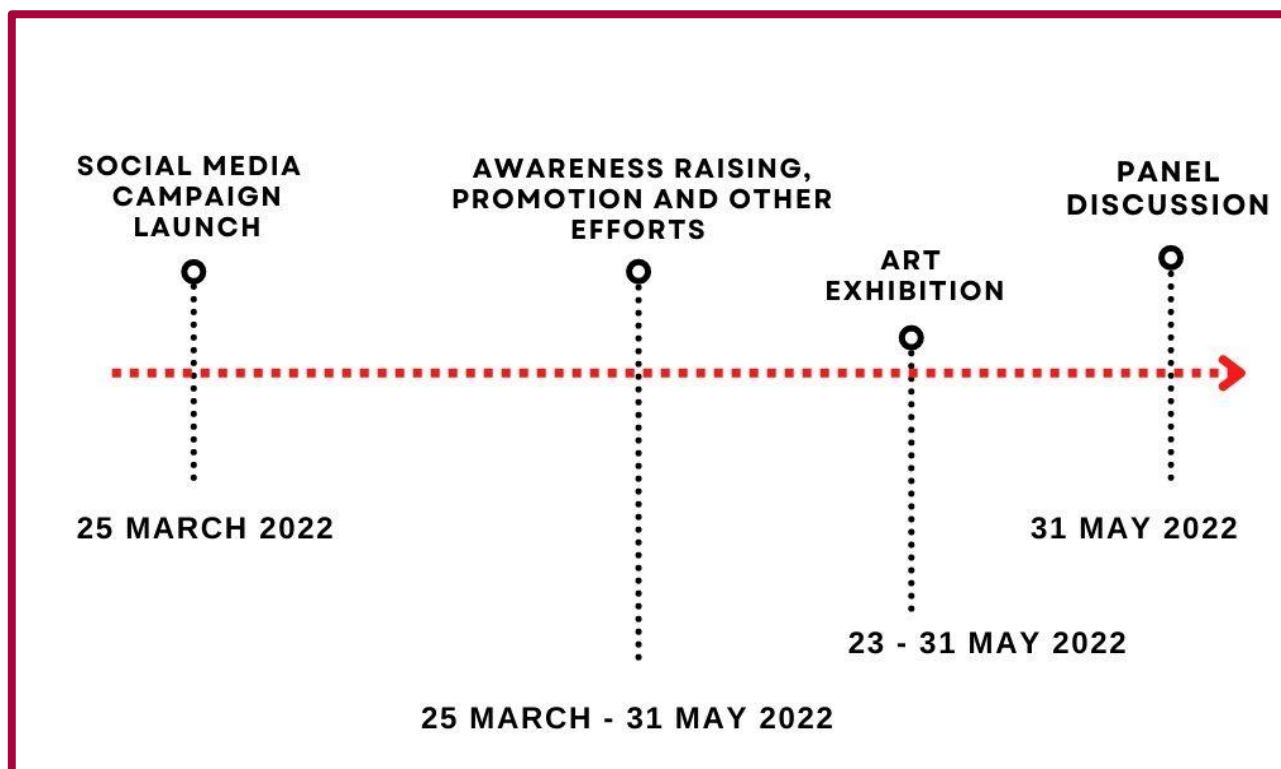
Challenges

- Access to the ground is much harder than anticipated.
- Material assistance is nearly impossible.
- Worsening situation of repression in Belarus
- Current war and related humanitarian crisis making it a difficult time for advocacy
- Existing organisations and groups that have made strategic interventions already
- Making an actual impact

From this analysis of challenges, gaps and opportunities we were able to roughly outline our advocacy plan. With the objective primarily aimed at raising awareness about the cases and the situation in Belarus at the core of our advocacy, we were able to decide on some potential activities as part of the campaign.

- **Social Media Awareness Raising and Advocacy:** One of the key activities we realised should be part of our advocacy campaign was designing a social media presence in English. The social media presence was aimed at not only generating awareness about Marfa and Yahors cases but also the situation in Belarus. The aim was also for this to add to the advocacy efforts and link to other ongoing efforts.
- **Seminar/Panel discussion:** One of the key events of the campaign we decided on was a panel discussion/seminar on academic freedom and the situation in Belarus. This became an important activity because we learnt about the need for creating awareness of the issue and the need to engage with organisations that were working on this issue. This would be a forum for experts working on issues of academic freedom and on Belarus in general to generate awareness on the issue and an opportunity for people with lived experiences from Belarus to share their stories.
- **Other efforts:** While the panel discussion was the key event of our advocacy efforts, we also planned for other efforts to be spread across the period of our advocacy campaign to build momentum as independent advocacy efforts. These included designing and distribution of an information pamphlet about the cases and the panel discussion, organising an art exhibition by a Belarusian photographer, continuing networking efforts, and looking for pro-bono support as well as other advocacy attempts.

Timeline



Social Media Outreach

Strategy: Creating and launching social media accounts

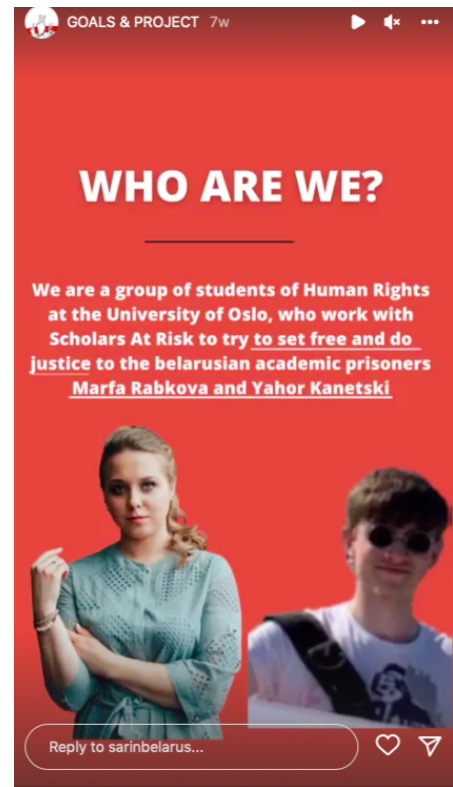
Social media presence became an important tool for creating awareness and building the momentum for our final event. After some discussion, we decided to use Twitter and Instagram as our preferred platforms. Initially, we were a bit sceptical about using Instagram and thought Twitter would be a better platform for our purpose. This was because we believed that Twitter was more frequently used for political and social issues than Instagram was. However, since Instagram would also allow us to have longer texts combined with images, we decided to use both platforms. To keep an obvious connection between the two accounts we needed a username that was available on both Instagram and Twitter. We decided that “@SarInBelarus”, an abbreviation of ‘Scholars at Risk in Belarus’, was a suitable name. We also found some existing hashtags that we could use in our posts, which allowed us to be a continuation of existing efforts rather than starting from scratch. Some of these include #FreedomOfSpeech #AcademicFreedom #ScholarsAtRisk #FreeMarfa #FreeYahor #FreeMarfaRabkova #FreeYahorKanetski #Belarus #StandWithBelarus #StandWithBelarusians

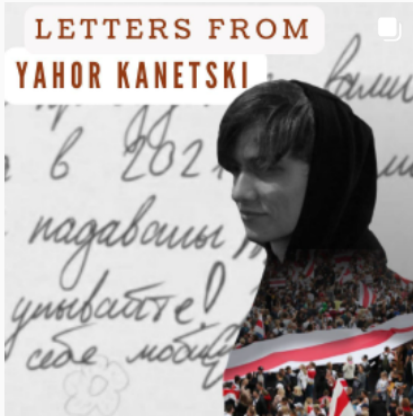
The main focus of the social media accounts was to create a foundation of knowledge and spark interest before our main event. We also wanted to have a consistent visual identity that would be easy to recognize.

Our first design was a simple illustration of hands showing the “V”-sign with white ribbons around their wrist, and a red and white background. These three elements are all symbols used by the protesters and opposition, and we thought that the simplicity and symbolism worked well as an initial post and logo. Our first post was launched on the 25th of March, on Belarusian “Freedom Day”. It had the illustration of the hands and provided some basic information about the situation in Belarus as well as stating the purpose of the accounts.

The following posts provided more specific information about Marfa and Yahor and updates about their cases. All our posts had a consistent design, with the same fonts and the same colour scheme (red, white and black), making them eye-catching and easy to recognize. Along with the graphics, the posts carried text descriptions which gave detailed information on each topic. Organisations that worked on issues related to Belarus and Academic Freedom were also tagged in posts for better reach. The designs for the posts were created by our social media manager, Jess, while the social media team, consisting of Mina, Lénita, and Naiara, assisted with creating visuals for the posts, stories, and writing the post captions on Instagram, while Devika had the responsibility of managing the twitter account.

Along with Instagram posts, we also posted Instagram stories (which are only visible for 24 hours at a time). These were created and posted on a regular basis in addition to the posts, news updates, easy to digest information, artwork, and actions the followers could take in order to participate in the solidarity effort. These stories were thought to raise questions, inform people, spread awareness and transmit the relevance of their actions within the case. The stories tried to follow the sequence of aspects treated in the posts, aiming to create accordance and harmony between them. The topics for stories were about Belarus, its situation to give context, about Marfa and Yahor, Academic Freedom through artwork, the health issues of Marfa and actions and reports by organisations etc. Per topic, there were four or more stories. Each story was made in a short video, where characters appear as long as you watch it. They contained photos, information, links to news, websites, artists, and other Instagram accounts.





Outcomes

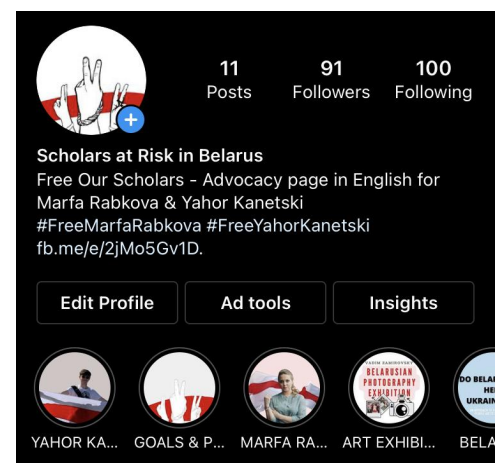
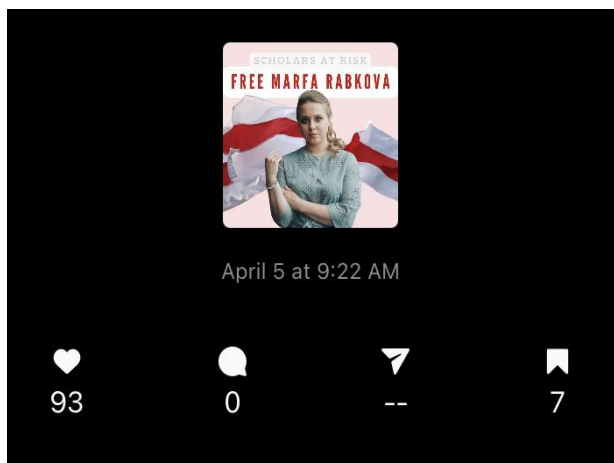
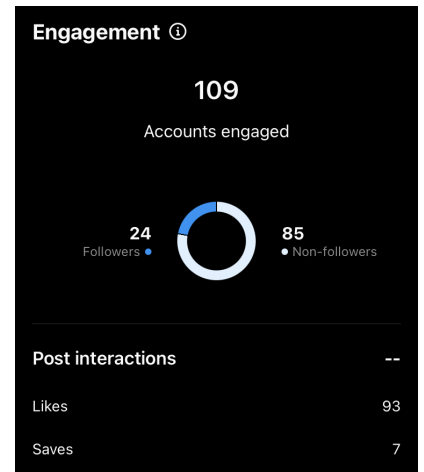
Instagram

The Instagram account was successful in providing easily accessible and shareable information about the academic freedom situation in Belarus, and about the cases of Marfa Rabkova and Yahor Kanetski in English. We launched our Instagram account on March 25th, and our final post went up on May 30th. Over the 2 month span that we were active on Instagram, we posted 11 posts, and 64 stories. While the posts permanently remain on our profile, the stories are temporarily available for a 24h period on our profile before they disappear. However, we created folders where we can sort our stories and display them permanently on our profile. We created a folder for both Yahor and Marfa, a folder for the stories describing who we are, one for our art exhibition, one for general information on Belarus, and then one where we featured Belarussian artists.



Over the course of our time posting, we amassed 91 followers, reached 1,175 separate accounts. The way that Instagram is set up allows for users to easily share posts to their audience through the means of their story. The post that had the best reach was our first post about Marfa Rabkova that reached 569 accounts, and received engagement from 109 accounts. This post was shared by over 20 people on their stories, including the account @FreeMarfa, which we believe contributed to the high engagement results on this specific post.

The posts that received the least amount of engagement were the posts we made advertising our event, and our Belarussian photography exhibition, because they were location specific to Oslo, however they both still reached 96 and 80 different accounts respectively.



Twitter

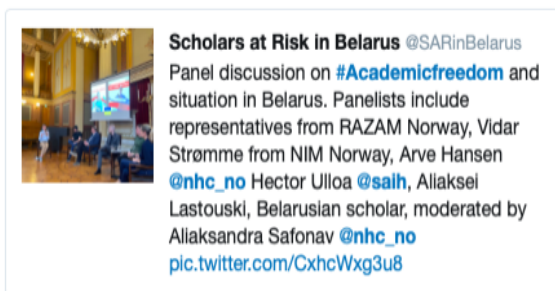
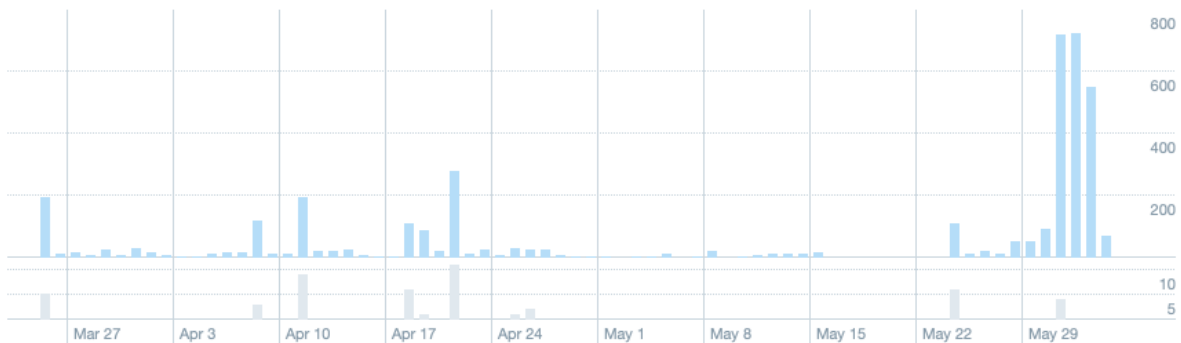
Social media presence on Twitter turned out to be different from Instagram. It required regular engagement with other Twitter accounts of organisations and groups. The Twitter page developed into an information-sharing page as well as a platform to show solidarity for other organisations by 'liking' or 're-tweeting' relevant tweets by relevant organisations. Twitter was also used for updates on the cases as it allows for translating tweets and searching through hashtags. For example, on the day of Marfa's trial, we were able to get timely updates by searching for #FreeMarfa. Twitter was also used for sharing all the graphics made for Instagram. These were shared through tweet threads so that people could read all the information together despite the character limit.

The Twitter handle was launched on 25 March. Since the launch 66 tweets were published including tweets with infographics which were also posted on Instagram and retweets of tweets by other organisations working on the issue. Additionally, other relevant tweets on the



issue were liked as a sign of solidarity and to increase reach. Below is an extract of the Twitter analytics since the launch. The impressions are the number of times users saw the tweets on Twitter and engagement is when a user interacts with the tweet (opens a link or likes/retweets). Most engagement and impressions were made during and around the Panel discussion on 31 May. Before the event the promotional tweets got a lot of attention and tweets during the event were retweeted and had a good reach. Tagging other organisations and those who partnered for the event helped with the reach. Retweets by other organisations helped with a much greater reach as most such organisations have a strong existing following.

Your Tweets earned **3.8K impressions** over this **71 day** period



Impressions	1,667
Total engagements	81
Detail expands	59
Retweets	6
Media engagements	6
Likes	6
Profile clicks	3
Replies	1

Tweet during panel discussion saw the highest reach

Norwegian Helsinki Committee
@nhc_no · May 31

Great #Belarus discussion today, featuring two of NHC's experts, Aliaksandra Safonava & Arve Hansen.

Scholars at Risk in Belarus @SARinBelarus · May 31

Panel discussion on #Academicfreedom and situation in Belarus. Panelists include representatives from RAZAM Norway, Vidar Strømme from NIM Norway, Arve Hansen @nhc_no Hector Ulloa @saih, Aliaksei Lastouski, Belarusian scholar, moderated by Aliaksandra Safonav @nhc_no

[Show this thread](#)



Tweet during panel discussion re-tweeted by Norwegian Helsinki Committee who were part of the panel

Free Viasna
@FreeViasna · May 31

Today @SARinBelarus are organizing a seminar in support of Marfa Rabkova and Yahor Kanetski. Join!
[#FreeMarfa](#) [#FreeViasna](#)

bit.ly/38SjFzC

FIND OUT MORE

SARINBELARUS
 SARINBELARUS

[#FreeMarfaRabkova](#)
[#FreeYahorKanetski](#)

SOLIDARITY SEMINAR

MAY 31, 17:00

GAMLE FESTSAL
DOMUS ACADEMICA
KARL JOHANS
GATE 47

EXHIBITION BY BELARUSIAN PHOTOGRAPHER VADIM ZAMIROVSKI
 FROM 23rd OF MAY
 AT DOMUS JURIDICA, 3rd FLOOR

Belarusisk forening i Norge RAZAM
 LIIO University of Oslo

DETAINED STUDENTS IN BELARUS

FREE MARFA AND YAHOR

SCHOLARS AT RISK NETWORK
protection advocacy learning

4 retweets, 8 likes

Twitter account @FreeViasna tweeted about the Panel Discussion and tagged us

Reflection

Originally, there were only two people on the social media team, Jess, the social media manager that designed the posts and wrote the captions, and Mina, who made a digital painting to add some visuals to the post. However, after only the first post, it was found that posting good social media content proved to be very time consuming, and so more people joined the team after completing other tasks. Having more people on the team meant that we could post more frequently and share the workload more evenly. It also made it easier for one to focus on Instagram “stories” and one to focus on Instagram “posts”. This helped us to have a regularity in posting both, posts and stories, which helped to make the accounts active. Having someone with expertise in design and art in the group was a very good asset for the social media advocacy effort.

Instagram seemed to be a very effective tool to share graphics and easy to digest information, particularly reaching out to students. Posts are also easy to share so, the reach can be assumed to be much more than we could assess from our page analytics.

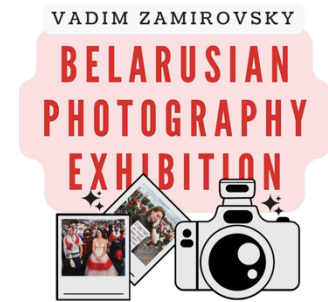
While Twitter was a good tool for awareness and engagement with other similar organisations and movements, it could be more effective as a long term strategy. In the short term,

engagement in terms of likes and followers was challenging but the appropriate use of hashtags and infographics helped a lot. One of the learnings seems to be that Twitter following and engagement, particularly on politically sensitive issues, seems to take time to build. Surrounding the event promotion and during the event, Twitter was a very effective tool especially when partnering organisations were tagged and appropriate hashtags were used.

Awareness Raising Efforts

Art Exhibition

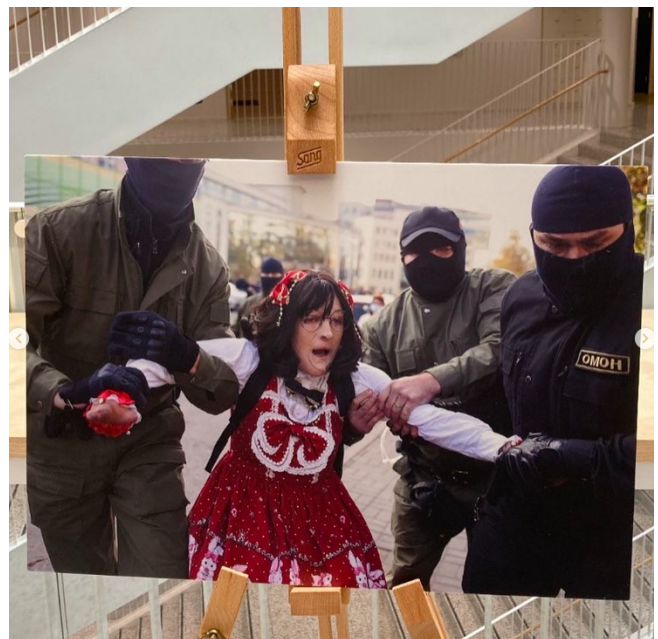
Strategy



The idea of reaching out to Belarusian artists stemmed from the circumstance that the Belarusian people are in where they disagree with their government but with little room to express dissent. The movie screening of 'Courage' was inspirational as well: the documentary follows the personal stories of activists involved with a theatre, a form of art. Efforts of subtle dissent by Belarusians are being made through art: paintings, theatre, music, etc. Our intention was to honour these efforts, and in conversation with RAZAM members, they told us about the photographer Vadim Zamirovskiy who documented the 2020 post-election. His pictures display varying perspectives on the 2020 uprisings: hope, anger, powerlessness, and the desire for change. Especially the intergenerational efforts were visible, with children, young adults, and the elderly protesting for system change.



From the exhibition at DJ



We were able to get access to the picture and display the powerful photographs at Domus Juridica (3rd floor) to raise awareness at the Law Faculty about Belarus. While an independent event on its own, the exhibition also helped advertise the panel discussion at the same time. The exhibition was displayed at Domus Juridica for a week and on the day of the panel discussion, it was moved to the event location.

Outcomes

The exhibition was visited by law students and others of the faculty during their breaks throughout the week before the event (23 - 30 May). Due to the nature of the event, we do not have numbers on how many people visited the exhibition and were actively reading the information about the photographer. However, due to the location and unique structure of the building, the exhibition was very visible and would have attracted a lot of viewers. Flyers and posters offering further information and about the panel discussion that were kept next to the exhibition helped to promote our event further.

Reflection

We believe that we possibly contributed to a change of perspective on the situation in Belarus at the Faculty of Law at the University of Oslo for individuals actively engaging with the exhibition. Although it is not possible to prove this numerically, we hope that the spectators of the exhibition will remember that there is an existing democratic resistance and opposition in Belarus. The Belarusian Government and the Belarusian people do not share the same interests, the most striking example is the stance on the war in Ukraine: Belarusians are outspoken about the injustice of the Russian invasion.

We were also able to learn a lot about artists and journalists who are actively using creative means for resistance in Belarus. Some of them were very willing to engage and contribute to solidarity efforts.

Information Flyers and Promotion of Event

Strategy

Once we had decided that the Seminar/Panel Discussion would be the key event of our advocacy project, we also wanted to explore avenues of promoting the event as well as using the period before to create more awareness about the issue. While social media was already

being used to share information about the situation in Belarus, we also wanted to reach out to people whom we may not be able to reach through social media. We decided that the two objectives of awareness-raising and event promotion could be fulfilled by distributing information flyers. We continued to use the same visual identity on these as in the initial social media posts, but our group member, Mina also digitally painted some drawings of Marfa and Yavor that we could use without worrying about possible copyright issues. They also added a more artistic, defined and unique look to the posters and flyers, which we hoped would spark more interest than a regular photo. Mina created foldable flyers and A3 sized posters. The foldable flyers had information about Marfa and Yavor's case and their portraits as well as details about the situation in Belarus. The flyers also had details about the event and QR codes to the Facebook event page and Instagram page. We also made some digital posters that we sent to the faculty to be shown on the screens at Domus Juridica. The digital posters only had the most necessary information on it and had a QR code that directed people to the Facebook event.

FIND OUT MORE

SARINBELARUS

SARINBELARUS

#FreeMarfaRabkova
#FreeYavorKanetski

SOLIDARITY SEMINAR

MAY 31, 17:00

GAMLE FESTSAL
DOMUS ACADEMICA
KARL JOHANS
GATE 47

EXHIBITION BY BELARUSIAN
PHOTOGRAPHER
VADIM ZAMIROVSKI

FROM 23rd OF MAY,
AT DOMUS JURIDICA, 3rd FLOOR

Belarusisk forening
i Norge RAZAM

Uio University of Oslo

DETAINED STUDENTS IN BELARUS
FREE MARFA AND VAHOR

MARFA RABKOVA

- Marfa is a 3rd year Belarusian student at the International Law and European Union Law program at Etnik, Lithuania.
- She is the Coordinator of the Volunteer Service at the Human Rights Center "Viasna". And she took an active part in the independent observation campaign "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections". She documented evidence of torture and other ill-treatment of detained protesters in Belarus.
- Marfa and her husband, Vadzim Zharomsky, were followed and detained on September 17, 2020. Vadzim was released on February 11, 2021, while Marfa received additional charges.
- She is still detained today, and has thirteen charges against her and can face up to 20 years in prison.
- Among other things, Marfa is charged with terror, hate crime, and participating in a criminal organization.
- In detention Marfa has been struggling with severe stomach pains, inflammation in her neck with a cyst on the thyroid, and tooth decay. On April 4, 2022 she finally received partial treatment for some of her health issues. However, many of her issues remains ignored and untreated.

NO FREEDOM IN BELARUS

Belarus is often described as "Europe's last dictatorship". The country has been ruled by Alexander Lukashenko since he took power in 1994. Since then his government has become increasingly authoritarian.

In the 2020 elections Lukashenko was once more announced as the winner, with an overwhelming 80% of the vote. The election was immediately condemned by international observers, and Lukashenko was accused of election fraud. Reports from several local polling stations supported these accusations. They showed Lukashenko to have a considerably smaller number of votes than what was claimed. As a result, many Belarusians took to the streets to protest the results and demand change. The government met the protesters with excessive violence, arrests, detainment, and prosecution.

In addition to the crack-down on protesters the government targeted academic institutions. Representatives of academia were subject to expulsion, administrative pressure, threats of criminal persecution and received politically motivated charges. The government also conducted targeted raids aimed at student leaders and faculty members. As of June 28, 2021, the Belarus Student's Association had observed 492 detained and 160 expelled students. 51 of those became suspects in criminal cases investigations.

YAVOR KANETSKI

- Yavor Kanetski is a student of the Faculty of Biology of the Belarusian State University. He is also a member of the Belarusian Student's Association (BSA) and the vice-chairman of the Free Trade Union.
- On November 12, 2020, the police conducted house raids on the homes of different members of the BSA, including Yavor. He was tackled to the floor. His phone was confiscated, as well as his computer, money, and documents by the KGB. He was taken into custody and was transferred to the Minsk Pre-trial Detention Center No.1 waiting for his trial.
- As part of the so-called "Student case" he was charged, among 11 others, for organization and preparation of actions violating public order or active participation in them (Criminal Code Article 342(1)).
- On July 16, 2021, he was sentenced to two years and six months in prison in a general-security penal colony.

SCHOLARS AT RISK NETWORK
protection advocacy learning

Foldable flyers, back and front.

To promote the event online, we created a Facebook event. We created the event in collaboration with Razam and posted the event through their Facebook account. We believed this could give us a greater reach as Razam is the main Belarusian contact point in Norway and could then easier promote the event to their contacts. We wanted to be an *extension* of existing efforts rather than creating something new and separate. We also made a registration page for the event to have an overview of how many attendants we could expect.

Knowing that there is a human rights course at the University of Life Sciences in Ås, we reached out to the head of the course to see if we could talk about our advocacy project in their class. We were able to get in touch with a professor at NMBU who has a course on Human Rights to speak to the class about the project and the event. Although the visit couldn't materialise, the professor then offered to share our event with the student organization, his students and the faculty, so we sent him a link to the Facebook event and a poster. In the last weeks leading up to the event, we also sent out several emails to NGOs, youth organizations, research institutes and others that we thought might be interested in our events.

31TH MAY, 17:00
AT GAMLE FESTSAL
DOMUS ACADEMIA UIO



Facebook event banner

Outcomes

In the weeks leading up to the event, we first printed around 80 copies of these and gave them to Razam to distribute. Later we printed out around 40 more copies, 10-15 of which we put at the photography exhibition at Domus Juridica. We put them there the same day as a seminar about Russia would occur in the building and hoped that some would pick up a flyer. However, very few of these flyers were picked up. 12 posters and 20 flyers were also placed at Cafe Mela, Kulturhuset, and some other places in the city centre of Oslo on 26th of May. We chose Kulturhuset and Mela Cafe because they are known for hosting debates and seminars, and we thought it would be likely that some of their customers might be interested in our event. Mela Cafe is also situated on the ground floor of Miljøhuset, which hosts several NGOs and was therefore considered an ideal place to reach out to people with a social commitment. We also put up some posters around Oslo Sentrum, to hopefully catch the eye of some passer-by's. The Norwegian Helsinki Committee, RAZAM members handed out a lot of flyers during an event with Svetlana Tikhanouskaya, the main figure in the Belarusian democratic movement and diaspora organisation.⁸⁸

⁸⁸[https://www.facebook.com/norwegianhelsinkicommittee?_cft__\[0\]=AZUZANvx91W62f7zBizN-2JGqpi-_5iDvSuHiqoFeAO8pnuV90IpAQxL-Zn11WvMZBBy3vDmbqKvQRb-bvfkNB3ww9JnCYE-_7zNyV4Edq6Z7HbtZixaebcMNGJvotom3uMw9X_m-WZqhqs5J7SOAugI&_tn_=-UC%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/norwegianhelsinkicommittee?_cft__[0]=AZUZANvx91W62f7zBizN-2JGqpi-_5iDvSuHiqoFeAO8pnuV90IpAQxL-Zn11WvMZBBy3vDmbqKvQRb-bvfkNB3ww9JnCYE-_7zNyV4Edq6Z7HbtZixaebcMNGJvotom3uMw9X_m-WZqhqs5J7SOAugI&_tn_=-UC%2CP-R)

Although we applied to have our digital poster on the screen for around two weeks leading up to the event, we discovered the week before the event that the screen did not show our posters. We did not find out why this was, and by the time we were directed to the right person to contact we had our hands full with other things and we were not able to find out why it was not displayed.

With regards to the event promotion through the flyers, we did not run any statistics with the seminar attendees about how they heard about the event. However, even if the flyers did not result in bringing in someone to the event, the information contained in the flyer would have surely increased awareness about the case and the situation in Belarus.

We got a few positive replies to the email invitations, from people who said they wanted or would try to come to the event. Norwegian Helsinki Committee, RAZAM, ELSA Oslo and other organisations helped promote the Panel Discussion. We were able to reach out to students within the law faculty and other students and others personally, as well. 55 people said they would attend the event on Facebook and 155 said they were interested.

Reflection

The dual strategy of the flyer being used for awareness-raising and event promotion seems to have been a good one. Even if someone was unable to attend the event, just knowing more about the issue is important outcomes of the advocacy project. Having a member of a team with designing skills was very helpful for designing and developing the flyer.

Flyer distribution at different locations, as well as the art exhibition, helped reach more people. Looking back, we would have liked to distribute flyers across more places in the city and follow up on the digital poster display at Domus Juridica.

Collaboration with other organisations helped reach out more for even promotion. Sharing the event on personal social media pages also helped, particularly in the days just before the event. Looking back, we would have tried to send out the email invites earlier.

SEMINAR: ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN BELARUS
in solidarity with detained students

MAY 31st 17:00

MARFA AND YAHOR
detained students
their story and cases

Exhibition by
Belarusian photographer
VADIM ZAMIROVSKY

Panel debate with:

- RAZAM**
(Belarusian Assisiation in Norway)
- VIDAR STRØMME**
(NIM)
- ARVE HANSEN**
(NHC)
- HECTOR ULLOA**
(SAIH)
- ALIAKSEI LASTOUSKI**
(Belarusian scholar)

SCHOLARS AT RISK NETWORK
protection advocacy learning

UiO University of Oslo

Belarusisk forening i Norge RAZAM

Gamele festsal Domus Academica, Karl Johans Gate 47

Other Efforts

Material and Legal Aid Support

One of the initial advocacy ideas we had thought of, was to extend material assistance. This could take the form of monetary assistance or legal aid. We thought of donation drives to collect monetary assistance and send it to the families of Marfa and Yahor or any organisation that can put the assistance to use. After attending the first meeting with the organization RAZAM, we learned how severe the situation in Belarus is. The idea of monetary assistance became nearly an impossible idea to materialise due to the very tight restrictions on funding and aid in the country. There were some possibilities of sending in support through individual bank transfers, but these possibilities came with incredible amounts of risks. Regarding the state of legal aid in Belarus during the meeting with RAZAM, we learnt about the medley of oppression of activists, lack of a fair trial, and the intimidation of attorneys who represent said activists. It became evident that attorneys within Belarus would not be able to advocate to their fullest capacity due to ongoing threats of losing their license. As such, one of the plausible solutions to ensure a fair trial was to have external attorneys represent the case, perhaps an international law firm, as part of their pro-bono program. Following this idea, we began researching and contacting law firms in the hopes of finding an eager team. This effort was mainly anchored by our group member Abdul.

In his efforts, he was mostly met with apologetic refusals that lacked concrete explanations. Eventually, the search for a pro-bono team transformed into a consistent but troubling carousel of sending inquiring emails and receiving refusals. Nonetheless, he stumbled upon a search engine created by Thomson Reuters named TrustLaw which allows NGOs to sign up on their website, enlist their legal needs, and will be paired with a law firm that will provide said desired legal services as part of the law firm's pro-bono work. However, we could not create an account and sign up on our own as only other organisations or institutions can register for it. We approached Scholars at Risk for the same, as it could be something that can be explored by Scholars at Risk. We hope this would be something Scholars at Risk can take forward.

We also continued to contact law firms. Miglena Angelova, head of pro-bono at Fietta law firm in the United Kingdom, was willing to see if they could aid our prisoned scholars. A zoom call was arranged to discuss possible aid, and unfortunately, Fietta could not aid us. However, a proposed solution by Ms Angeolva was to search for Belarusian lawyers with dual citizenship that worked in human rights and were willing to take the case. The fact that they were Belarusian would allow them to advocate in local courts. The fact that they worked in an international law firm would allow room for international pressure. Lastly, dual-citizenship would protect them. Notwithstanding this, such a task would be impossible within our limited time but we hope this could be a strategy that can be explored by groups in Belarus or Scholars at Risk. Overall, although the hope for pro-bono representation did not materialise into concrete action, we were able to explore some possible solutions despite the extremely challenging conditions surrounding the same and we hope these can be explored further, beyond our project.

Promotional Activity

While coming up with different ideas to promote the panel discussion, we thought of was to do a promotional activity on a specific day. A proposal for this, suggested by a group member, Abdul, was to utilize Theatre of the Oppressed. This genre of theatre uses shock value to present current events to the general public and encourages dialogue between the performers and the audience to create a capacity for critical understanding and problem-solving. One of the key components of the Theatre of the Oppressed is to offer a certain shock value which we wanted to use to bring the attention of a crowd and use that to distribute flyers and promote the event. Indeed it is easy to walk past a volunteer handing out flyers when we are not emotionally engaged. Thus, this approach offers the audience a glimpse of real-life suffering and creates an emotional bond between the spectator, the performer and the cause. This bond motivates an audience to take action and be proactive as opposed to regular campaigning modes. We planned for a 'performance' where two group members would sit on two chairs in the lobby area of our academic building. The two members would have their wrists and mouths taped to represent our political prisoners and their forced silence. One of them may be blindfolded as well and with the use of makeup, we would create fake bruises. While the two performers are so seated, a third member from the group would be handing out flyers to whoever is intrigued and will explain the motivations behind this activity, the advocacy initiative, and invite the person to the upcoming event. We contacted the administration of the faculty for permission to organise the same. Unfortunately due to the nature of the performance, we were not permitted the same in a public space, instead, the faculty offered permission for the same if conducted in a room where only people who would be interested can attend. Since the primary aim of this event was to promote the panel discussion, moving it to a room would defeat the purpose and reduce the reach. We tried to explore the idea of doing the same at the Blindern campus. However, we were not able to get a response on the same and due to time constraints, we decided to continue with other promotional activities instead.

Seminar on Academic Freedom and Situation in Belarus

Strategy

In the light of limited possibilities to have an 'impact on the ground', the key to our advocacy strategy was to host an event, such as a panel discussion, at the Faculty of Law informing about Marfa and Yahor and the general situation in Belarus. We kept in contact with Razam and we made sure that a seminar on academic freedom in Belarus would actually be in the interest of the Belarusian Diaspora in Norway. Furthermore, we invited them to collaborate and co-host the event. Our group member, Katarina, had several meetings with Darya Shut and Maryia Akkuratnova, head and vice-head of Razam.⁸⁹ We researched organizations and academics who work on Belarus and reached out to people who might be suitable for participation in a potential panel discussion. The rationale behind this: giving a voice to the 'voiceless', or rather, empowering Belarusians to speak about the circumstances in their respective home country. We did not want to host an event with only Norwegian (or Western) academics speaking about a country they have researched. We wanted Belarusians to speak about Belarus. Some group members went to the Belarusian Freedom Day, an informal Belarusian National Day in front of Tinghuset, the Norwegian Parliament. There, they met Arve Hansen, an academic working for the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and specialised in the East Slavic Region, that is Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia.⁹⁰ He showed interest in taking part in an event. RAZAM also suggested Aliaksei Lastouski as an academic who recently left Belarus because he was dismissed after political statements. Aliaksei is a sociologist who researches the Belarusian identity, 'russification' of Belarus, and historical developments in Belarus.⁹¹ Although we could not get financial support for Aliaksei's travel and stay from the University, RAZAM stepped in and covered the flights and the hotel stay. Our initial idea of having a Belarusian student, Aliaksandra Haurusik,⁹² did not work out due to reasons of time. We met her at the movie screening of 'Courage' and made contact with her. Mariya from RAZAM showed interest to be a part of a panel debate as well. At this point, we felt like we had covered the 'Belarusian' part of the panel debate.

Our group member, Katarina came up with the idea to invite Vidar Strømme,⁹³ a legal scholar specialising in academic freedom and freedom of expression. To have another student and activist perspective, we invited Hector Ulloa, president of SAIH, as well.⁹⁴ Our group member, Nils, had made personal contact with Hector earlier at an event hosted by the Norwegian Centre

⁸⁹ Belarusisk forening i Norge RAZAM, <https://razam.no/> (accessed 7 June 2022)

⁹⁰ Norwegian Helsinki Committee, "Arve Hansen" <https://www.nhc.no/en/employee/arve-hansen/> (accessed 7 June 2022)

⁹¹ Google Scholar, "Aliaksei Lastouski" <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=Oq7md3UAAAAJ&hl=en> (accessed 7 June 2022) and Academia, "Aliaksei Lastouski" <https://uppsala.academia.edu/AliakseiLastouski> (accessed 7 June 2022)

⁹² BT, "Plakatjenten", <https://www.bt.no/btmagasinet/i/47r556/plakatjenten> accessed 7 June 2022)

⁹³ NIM, "Vidar Strømme" <https://www.nhri.no/2021/vidar-stromme-blir-fagdirektor-i-nim/> (accessed 7 June 2022)

⁹⁴ SAIH, "Hector Ulloa" <https://saih.no/kontakt/hector-ulloa> (accessed 7 June 2022)

of Human Rights where he spoke about advocacy campaigns as a learning method (which, our Course Director, Peris, had invited him to). Hector is known as an excellent speaker who advocates successfully for politically motivated imprisoned students. Lastly, we invited Inna Sangadzhieva to be the chairperson for the panel debate. Nils had met Inna through his internship at the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and she is an expert on Russia and Belarus, too. Inna decided to suggest Aliaksandra Safonava,⁹⁵ a researcher for the Norwegian Helsinki Committee as well, as a moderator. Aliaksandra is Belarusian herself, and we agreed that she would be the best fit to have the chair for a panel debate. In the following, we thought of ways to connect the topics of imprisoned students Marfa and Yahor, Belarus, the deteriorating situation in Belarus since 2020 and academic freedom into one event. We were able to get the Gamle Festsalen at the Faculty of Law with the help of the Centre and the Faculty for the event. The venue was spacious enough for at least 100 attendees with all the facilities in place for the panel discussion.

We created three main objectives for the seminar:

- To spread awareness of the situation in Belarus after 2020
- To initiate debate on academic freedom and highlight its importance
- To ignite engagement on the issue of imprisoned academics, highlighting the cases of Marfa Rabkova and Yahor Kanetski

With the below program, we tried achieving this threefold goal:

Academic Freedom in Belarus

Solidarity from different perspectives

Tuesday 31st of May, 17.00 - 19.00

Location: Gamle Festsalen Domus Media

17.00 Doors open, Art Exhibition - *Vadim Zamirovsky*

17.30 Welcome Note and about the Advocacy Project by *Nils, Student, UiO*

17.45 Lecture: Fight for academic freedom: Belarus after 2020 by *Aliaksei Lastouski, Belarusian researcher and sociologist living in Lithuania* (Content in lecture: Historical perspective on the development of the situation in Belarus).

18.15 About Marfa and Yahor by *Devika Nair Student UiO*

⁹⁵ Norwegian Helsinki Committee, "Aliaksandra Safonava" <https://www.nhc.no/en/employee/aliaksandra-safonava/> (accessed 7 June 2022)

18.20 Short break

18.30 Panel discussion: The State and Importance of Academic Freedom in Belarus

Chair: *Aliaksandra Safonova (NHC - Norwegian Helsinki Committee)*

Panellists:

Aliaksei Lastouski (researcher, sociologist)

Maria Akkuratnova (Razam)

Vidar Strømme (NIM - Norwegian National Institute for HR)

Arve Hansen (NHC - Norwegian Helsinki Committee)

Hector Ulloa (SAIH - Norwegian students' and academics' International Assistance Fund)

Vote of Thanks by Katarina by Student UiO



Panellists: Aliaksandra Safonova, Hector Ulloa, Vidar Strømme, Arve Hansen, Aliaksei Lastouski, and Maria Akkuratnova.

As described in the above sections, we promoted the event very proactively through e-mails, posters, the art exhibition at Domus Juridica and Social Media. RAZAM promoted the event as well with our flyers (designed by Mina). On the day of the event, the Facebook page had over 215 people interested or going to the event. We were not sure how many people would show up.

In addition to the panel discussion, we also moved the art exhibition by Vadim Zamirovskiy from the Domus Juridica to outside the venue of the event giving attendees a chance to take a look at it. There was some time in the beginning of the event for the attendees to take a look at the exhibition and we also had a was a short break during the event for those who could not have a look at it in the beginning.



First thing the participants saw when entering the event was the photo exhibition by Vadim Zamirovskiy

Outcomes

We proceeded to prepare the event as planned, the panel debate was very insightful and we were overall satisfied with how the event went. The major issue was that we did not manage to get a larger audience to attend. There were approximately 30 people present, mainly master's students of our programme, and some people connected to the Razam.

Nonetheless, it was successful in the sense that we held the seminar in an informative manner, and it shed light on the situation of our two imprisoned students and on academic freedom, generally and in Belarus. A critical outcome of the Panel debate was that we were able to get a diverse set of views on the issue. From the legal issues that Vidar Strømme spoke about, to lived experiences shared by Aliaksei and the socio-political inputs of Hector, Maria and Arve, the discussion was a rather



Aliaksei Lastouski:
"The fight for academic freedom".

multifaceted one. For the attendees, this would have meant that they were able to get a wholesome understanding of the situation in Belarus and the impact of this on the two students, Marfa and Yahor.

It was also an opportunity for Razam and the other organisations that partnered with us to network and meet each other. We hope this would have been a good avenue for future collaborations and advocacy.

Members of Razam also brought with them some postcards on which they requested attendees to write some words of solidarity for Marfa and Yahor. The team at Razam would be able to add the addresses to the Prisons they were in and send it to them. This turned out to be a great activity to end the event with. Most of the participants wrote on the postcards as a sign of solidarity with the two students.



Participants writing messages of solidarity on post cards to Marfa and Yahor at the end of the seminar.

Reflection

Overall, the event was definitely an enlightening one for the attendees, who were able to understand the situation in Belarus in a more in depth manner as well as the cases of Marfa and Yahor. It is difficult to say what could have been done differently to get more people interested in the event. A lot of factors could have been causing the absence of 200 people who showed interest in the event on Facebook. For example, the timing: was it the fact that we held the seminar after a holiday, after work hours, somewhat in the middle of the exam period, or all of the aforementioned combined.

Additionally, the topic itself has to be considered very 'niche', or even like an emotive subject. We planned the seminar based on the assumption that there are a lot of misconceptions about Belarus. Especially since Russia invaded Ukraine, the line between Russia and Belarus gets very blurry for many people, apparently even for law students. Did our event appear to be pro-Belarusian, as in pro-Lukashenko, or maybe even pro-Russian? We'll never know, no law student or other faculty member was telling us to stop the pro-Lukashenko propaganda.

REFLECTIONS

Reflections about the Project

Overall, the project was very instructive for the group. Role allocation, organisation of weekly meetings and debating the best approach for our two imprisoned students demanded a lot of learning and understanding in the process. To find a mode of campaigning, to understand the specifics of our students' country, Belarus, were two things crucial to the whole process. Thus, the learning process can be described as mainly positive and helping us gain practical experience on working on such issues. We were able to understand the challenges associated with such kind of advocacy work and understand how to set realistic goals and objectives.

The outcome on the other hand, is very unpredictable. A very important aspect of the imprisonment of political (student) activists is for the oppressive regime to a) silence them by actually locking them away and b) making sure that their activism fades and eventually will be forgotten. We attempted countering the latter effect of political imprisonment: making sure these two students won't be forgotten so easily. It is however difficult to say to what extent we were successful in this endeavour.

For many of us, the workload we decided to shoulder clashed with other obligations: exams, internships, side jobs, etc. The decision to put the internship module in the same module as the advocacy campaign module makes it somewhat difficult to focus on one thing at the time. We are aware nonetheless that we would have invested less time and energy into the advocacy campaign but it did not seem right to carry out a half-hearted campaign for two actual imprisoned students. Thus, we were able to allocate tasks with flexibility and help each other out whenever needed.

Way Forward and Recommendations for SAR

Although we did not make use of it in an extensive manner, we were offered the support of SAR for our project through advice, networking possibilities etc. in general, these opportunities can be very useful but did not fit with our mode of working and campaigning.

The way forward for our campaign will probably be that somebody else might take over social media and make use of it; student groups from other universities are starting to plan advocacy campaigns of their own. Another possibility would be to hand it over to RAZAM, if they would be interested in that. We hope that the traction the social media handles has gathered can help the efforts of groups who will continue to advocate for the students and the situation in Belarus. We also hope that groups or SAR are able to explore the pro-bono option we described in the 'other efforts' section, above.

A recommendation or an idea for SAR would be to implement a financial part to the advocacy campaign. An advocacy campaign can be seen as a subcategory of general project management, and almost any project management has a financial side to it. We did not struggle with finances, we received a little financial help from the university and in the end RAZAM paid for the Belarusian scholar's flight to Norway. It would be interesting to see what kind of difference it would make if all the student groups would have access to a certain amount of money to use freely for their campaign. If a student group would need more after that amount of money, they could still ask at their university or other institutions.

Adding a financial planning part to it, and therefore slightly increasing the workload, would maybe justify it as well to make it a stand-alone module at our faculty/ in our study programme. We would recommend our university as well to stick to the concept of *not* grading these campaigns. Equal share of workload is highly unlikely in group projects, and sometimes even undesired. Another question would be what actually would be graded: the time spent on the project, the outcome, the creativity, a mixture out of all of these? The resulting recommendation for SAR therefore is that SAR should generally recommend universities to *not* grade these advocacy efforts.

TEAM MEMBERS

Nils Alexander Alwon; Project leader, Advocacy and Report Management

Nika Arevadze; Legal Advisor and outreach

Katarina Lavrinenko Friis-Olsen; Research, Advocacy, Outreach and event manager.

Lénita Kunz; Research and Social Media

Jessica Joy Peters; Social Media

Devika Santhosh Nair; Legal Advisor, Outreach and Report Management

Mina Nornes Westli; Social Media, Art & Design, Outreach

Abdulrahman Adel N. Mohammed; Advocacy

Fanuel Kaseke; Advocacy

Naiara Araiz de Tellitu Rodríguez; Research, Outreach and Social Media