

6 January 2021

Belarus: Belarus Press Club members face tax violations charges

On 22 December 2020, five human rights defenders and members of the **Belarus Press Club**, **Yulia Slutskaya**, **Sergey Olshevskiy**, **Alla Sharko**, **Sergey Yakupov** and **Petr Slutsky** were detained in Minsk. They were all questioned by the Department of Financial Investigations on the suspicion of tax evasion. Sergey Yakupov was later released from the pre-trial detention centre and was deported to Russia on 31 December 2020. The four other human rights defenders were indicted and remain in detention.

[Belarus Press Club](#) is a platform for the professional development of Belarusian independent media and journalists, and a member of the International Association of Press Clubs (IAPC). Press Club conducts educational trainings, provides space for professional discussion and development of new media projects and monitors compliance of Belarusian media materials with journalistic standards. Since protests began after the 2020 Presidential election, the Belarus Press Club has been closely following repression against independent media and journalists in Belarus, and has compiled the collected data into a project called “Press under Pressure”, which includes cases of detention and arrest, physical abuse, blocking of independent media websites, denial of printing and distribution for printed media, and the revoking of journalistic accreditation of foreign journalists.

On 31 December 2020, [Yulia Slutskaya](#), the founder of Press Club Belarus, was handed an indictment for “tax evasion on an especially large scale” (part 2 of Article 243 of the Criminal Code). On the same day, Press Club Director [Sergey Olshevskiy](#) and cameraman [Petr Slutsky](#) were handed an indictment for complicity in the same crime (part 6 of article 16, part 2 of article 243 of the Criminal Code). Program Director [Alla Sharko](#) was also indicted, but information about particular charges has not yet been disclosed. That same day, Media Academy Program Director [Sergey Yakupov](#), a Russian citizen, was released from the pre-trial detention centre and sent to Russia. No charges were brought against him however he was issued with a 10 year travel ban on re-entering Belarus.

Woman human rights defender Yulia Slutskaya was detained on 22 December at the airport in Minsk as she arrived home from her family vacation. On the same day, four other members of the Belarus Press Club were also detained: Alla Sharko, Sergey Yakupov, Sergey Olshevskiy and Petr Slutsky. The Press Club’s office as well as the homes of Yulia Slutskaya, Alla Sharko, Sergey Yakupov and Sergey Olshevskiy were searched. While the police officers were conducting the search at the Press Club’s office the security guards prevented anyone from entering the building. Alla Sharko’s attorney went to his clients house to witness the search but was prohibited from entering. All members of the Press Club who were detained were later questioned at the Department of Financial Investigations of the State Control Committee, and four are currently being held in the detention centre No.1 on Volodarskaya street.

Since the results of the 2020 Presidential election, journalists in Belarus have been under tremendous pressure as a consequence of their work. According to the data collected by the Belarusian Association of Journalists, since 9 August 2020, 480 journalists have been detained in Belarus and eight of them are still in jail. The Belarus Press Club has been vocal on these cases, have been promoting freedom of speech and have supported independent journalists with necessary training. These actions may have an all-important effect on the promotion and protection of human rights in the Belarus, and may be conducive to the creation of a safe and enabling environment in which defenders and journalists can carry out their work.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the indictment of Yulia Slutskaia, Sergey Olshevskiy, Alla Sharko and Petr Slutsky. Their detention follows a number of acts of reprisal against and judicial harassment of human rights defenders and journalists by the law enforcement representatives in Belarus since the results of the 2020 Presidential election were announced on 9 August. Front Line defenders believes the five aforementioned human rights defenders and journalists are being targeted solely as a result of their work in promoting and protecting human rights in Belarus.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Belarus to:

1. Take all necessary measures to ensure the immediate and unconditional release of Yulia Slutskaia, Sergey Olshevskiy, Alla Sharko and Petr Slutsky and guarantee their physical and psychological security and integrity;
2. Immediately drop all charges against Yulia Slutskaia, Sergey Olshevskiy, Alla Sharko and Petr Slutsky as it is believed that they are solely motivated by their legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
3. Immediately revoke the ten year travel ban imposed on human rights defender Sergey Yakupov;
4. Immediately cease the harassment and prosecution of all members of the Belarus Press Club and guarantee that their right to freedom of association and assembly is respected.
5. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Belarus are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.