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**Statement on the deprivation of licenses from Belarusian lawyers**

Lawyers for Lawyers (L4L) remains deeply concerned about the plight of lawyers in Belarus. Following the presidential elections in the Republic of Belarus in 2020, the Belarusian Legal Profession has come under the control of the Belarusian Ministry of Justice. The Ministry’s “Department for Interests and Licenses for Legal Activities” has since then repeatedly iterated its commitment to “purification of the legal profession.” From 2020 to August 2023, nearly a quarter of all lawyers in Belarus were expelled from the legal profession. With this statement, L4L wishes to draw attention, in particular, to the practice of depriving Belarusian lawyers of their licenses due to "misconduct incompatible with the lawyer's title.”

Despite receiving international attention, and while the practice of depriving lawyers of their licenses appears to have decreased in recent years — presumably due to the submission in July 2021 by the UN Human Rights Committee of considerations on the appeal of lawyer Oleg Ageev, who was deprived of his license in 2021 — the practice continues of depriving lawyers of their licenses “due to misconduct incompatible with the lawyer’s title” continues. Since the beginning of this year, the Ministry of Justice terminated the licenses of at least 16 attorneys due to “misconduct incompatible with the title of lawyer.”

In most cases, the alleged misconduct is not specified. Others were accused of making “incompetent statements to the media” or “calling for illegal action.” There have even come cases to our attention in which a lawyer was deprived of his or her right to practice law for liking a post on social media. Other lawyers were deprived of their licenses on broad and vague grounds, including “lacking the necessary qualifications to fulfill their professional duties” or administrative offenses. It appears that a significant amount of cases are related to criticism of the government. Examples are the cases of Alexander Pylchenko and Mikhail Kirilyuk. Two months prior to his license being revoked, Pylchenko gave an interview in which he criticized the office of the procurer-general, which, in his view ignored large-scale ill-treatment of protestors. Mikhail Kirilyuk’s license was revoked because he "made public statements on the global computer network Internet, containing rude, tactless expressions in relation to representatives of state bodies, which is unacceptable”.

*Appeal to the Belarusian authorities*

An independent legal profession advocating before independent courts and tribunals is essential to the impartiality and integrity of the legal system and, by extension, the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms to which all persons are entitled. The continued practice of depriving lawyers of their licenses “due to misconduct incompatible with the lawyer's title” is incompatible with the United Nations Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers.

Lawyers for Lawyers would like to draw your attention to the United Nations Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers and, more in particular, Articles 16, 23, 24, and 28, which state:

*16. Governments shall ensure that lawyers (a) are able to perform all of their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment, or improper interference (…) and (c) shall not suffer, or be threatened with, prosecution or administrative, economic or other sanctions for any action taken in accordance with recognized professional duties, standards and ethics.*

*23. Lawyers, like other citizens, are entitled to freedom of expression, belief, association, and assembly. In particular, they shall have the right to take part in public discussion of matters concerning the law, the administration of justice, and the promotion and protection of human rights and to join or form local, national, or international organizations and attend their meetings, without suffering professional restrictions by reason of their lawful action or their membership in a lawful organization. In exercising these rights, lawyers shall always conduct themselves in accordance with the law and the recognized standards and ethics of the legal profession.*

In view of the above, Lawyers for Lawyers respectfully urges the Belarusian authorities to:

* Put an end to the practice of depriving lawyers of their licenses unless credible evidence is presented in proceedings that comply with the United Nations Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers.
* Guarantee that all lawyers in Belarus can carry out their legitimate professional activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.
* Ensure that all Belarusian lawyers can exercise their right to freedom of expression without fear of reprisals, including disciplinary action.
* Guarantee independent and impartial examinations of administrative decisions taken by the Ministry of Justice.