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**30 November 2011**

**STATEMENT OF THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM  
on the sentencing of Ales Bialiatski in Belarus**

On 24 November 2011, a politically motivated verdict was pronounced in Belarus against a prominent human rights defender, leader of the Human Rights Center “Viasna”, Vice-President of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Ales Bialiatski. He was found guilty of alleged “tax evasion on a large scale”, and sentenced to four-and-a-half years of imprisonment in a high-security penal colony with confiscation of property.

Thus, a prominent human rights defender joined the list of political prisoners in Belarus.

Ales Bialiatski is internationally recognised as an impartial and outspoken human-rights defender, who has persistently and conscientiously protected the ideals of human rights and democracy under authoritarian circumstances.

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum expresses resolute protest at Ales Bialiatski’s conviction and reiterates its position on his persecution and arrest, voiced by over 50 participants of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum in a statement adopted on 29 August 2011.

We would like to state the following:

- The prosecution and conviction of Ales Bialiatski on tax charges cannot disguise the true reasons for the harassment of the human-rights defender. We are convinced that the tax charges, related to the disclosure of his personal bank accounts in EU countries, are nothing but a pretext for isolating the key figure in the country’s human rights movement. These accounts were used solely for the funding of human rights activities in Belarus.
- We emphasize that the trial failed to produce even indirect evidence of Ales Bialiatski’s guilt, for which he was unjustly punished.
- We believe that the verdict in the case of Ales Bialiatski is the result of the Belarusian authorities’ repressive policy over many years against human rights groups and defenders for their criticism of the country’s human rights record.

We call upon the European Union institutions and member states to take measures toward the release of Ales Bialiatski and other political prisoners, as there should be no political prisoners in the countries that have signed the Eastern Partnership Declaration.

We demand the immediate and unconditional release and full rehabilitation of Ales Bialiatski.