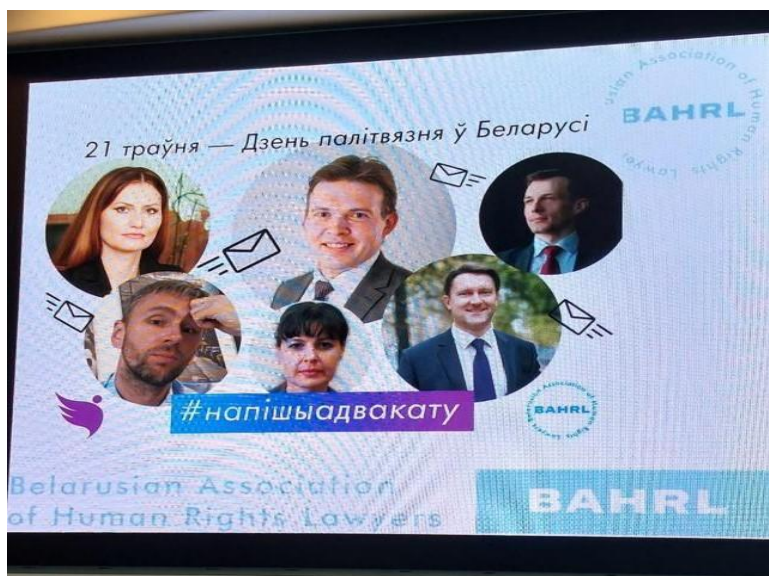


PROTECTING THE RULE OF LAW

Belarus: Independent lawyers at risk



On the 15th September in Rotterdam, the FBE Human Rights Commission with the Rotterdam Bar organised a very well attended meeting with lawyers from Belarus on-line, members of the Rotterdam Bar, and the 20 competitors in the Human Rights Oratory Competition.

The principal speakers were Irma Van Den Berg, Lawyers for Lawyers, Maryia Kolesava-Hudzilina, President of the Belarus Association of Human Rights Lawyers (BAHRL); Peter Hanenberg, Dean of the Rotterdam Bar, Monique Stengel and Artur Wierzbicki, both of the FBE.

Irma Van Den Berg, from Lawyers for Lawyers (L4L) spoke about the work of L4L who support lawyers at risk in any country. They have 3 ways:

- Defence of lawyers at risk including supporting with letters and cards and pressure on Ministries of Justice, awarding the L4L prize each year to a lawyer at risk
- Empowerment and training of lawyers and human rights defenders on UN tools and mechanisms, publishing toolkits;
- influence and lobbying national and regional parliaments and the United Nations, writing reports about the human rights situation, trial monitoring and issuing public statements.

Maryna Kolesava-Hudzilina informed the meeting that crimes against humanity, including torture and displacement are being committed in Belarus. The independence of lawyers is not respected, and lawyers are deprived of their right to practice, by removal of their licences, and imprisoned for carrying out their duties to represent their clients. There are 131 lawyers deprived of their licences, 6 lawyers in prison among 1500 political prisoners. Among the 6 lawyers in prison are: Maksim Znak in prison since 2021, sentenced to 10 years in prison, Vitaly Bragniets in prison since February 2023, sentenced to 8 years and Alexander Danilevich sentenced to 10 years in April 2023.

600 lawyers left the legal profession from 2021 when the Belarus Bar became controlled by the state. Exiled lawyers and those inside Belarus are helping their colleagues with hotlines with information, and seeking ways to support those who need to practice in another country.

There is some important recognition of the situation in Belarus. On 21 May the International of Day of Political Prisoners in Belarus marks the support of the international community. The legal

community can publicise this and mark it with their members. In June this year, the Council of Europe discussed Belarus, and the Belarus Association of Human Rights Lawyers was mentioned in the documents.

Peter Hanenberg, Dean of the Rotterdam Bar, spoke about the need to support Belarusian lawyers in exile. There are ways that the international legal community can support, such as organising training, especially in legal English classes, and offering internships in order for exile lawyers to have the opportunity to work as lawyers.

Artur Wierzbicki and Monique Stengel spoke about the FBE and how we will work closer with Lawyers for Lawyers to build a strong body of support for human rights lawyers at risk. Joanna Wsolek of the FBE Solidarity Commission assisted the meeting and is the President of the FBE Solidarity Commission. Discussions about future support for Belarusian lawyers will be part of the agenda of the Human Rights Commission, and the Solidarity Commission of the FBE.

