

# Principles of Human Rights Work in Belarus

---

This document presents a set of professional and ethical principles determining the requirements for human rights defenders and their professional activities. It is based on the ethical criteria and traditions of human rights work in Belarus, as well as on the international standards and rules for human rights activities.

The purpose of these Principles is to foster responsible corporate culture in the human rights community, which will contribute to raising public trust to and respect for the human rights community, taking into account the social importance of human rights work. The adherence to the Principles is the moral duty of every human rights defender.

We base our human rights work on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the OSCE Guidelines on the Protection of the Human Rights Defenders, and other universal principles, norms and standards.

**The Principles of Human Rights Work** apply to relations between human rights defenders and to relations of human rights defenders with victims of human rights violations, public authorities, international organizations, civil society organizations, other professional communities, and the media.

The document applies to the Belarusian human rights organizations and human rights defenders in their individual capacity and **is open for the accession**.

Human rights defenders are those individuals, groups and bodies of the society who, acting peacefully, individually and/or jointly with others, exercise, promote and/or protect human rights and fundamental freedoms at the local, national and/or international levels. They recognize the universality of human rights for all without any distinction.

In our work, we adhere to the following principles:

## **1. Commitment to the idea of the universality of human rights**

The recognition, observance and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms determine the main meaning and content of human rights work. Internationally recognized human rights are universal, and it is unacceptable to use any specificities of the national legal system or sociocultural features of the society to justify infringement of human rights.

In our work, we proceed from the premise that all human rights and fundamental freedoms are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated, and should be promoted and exercised on a fair and equitable basis, without any discrimination and damage to the enjoyment of each of these rights and freedoms.

## **2. Non-discrimination**

In their work, human rights defenders do not accept any discriminatory approaches to or statements about any persons or groups and strive for steady eradication of discrimination in all spheres of public life.

The equal access to assistance provided by human rights defenders must be ensured to all victims of human rights violations, regardless of their gender, age, race, nationality, religion, sexual identity, financial situation, position, type and nature of occupation, place of residence, language, political creed and other beliefs, and other differences. Human rights defenders give no preference to any professional or social groups or civic organizations.

## **3. Self-sustainability, independence and self-governing**

When carrying out human rights activities, human rights defenders independently determine the permissible nature, forms and degree of interaction with the state, its officials, political parties and other institutions, private companies and other entities, including international, foreign and national organizations.

Human rights defenders seek a mutually beneficial and equitable dialogue with these parties, obviously excluding any subordination of the human rights protection purpose to any other interests and preventing interference in the human rights work content and focus/ orientation.

This provision does not exclude the possibility for human rights defenders to coordinate their activities with other human rights organizations, human rights defenders and other entities.

Human rights organizations base their work on documents regulating their activities and on the principles of voluntary participation, common interests, goals

and objectives of the organization, respect for human rights and democratic decision-making.

#### **4. Openness and transparency**

In our work, we strive for maximum openness and transparency for the society and the state. We stand for transparency and openness of our human rights objectives, structure and activities, without violating the safety of the target groups.

Human rights defenders provide public information about their human rights work in order to raise the level of trust among their partners, the public and the state.

#### **5. Honesty, maximum reliability and objectivity**

Human rights defenders do their best to carry out their activities impartially and to base their position on reliable and objective data. We distribute only verified and reliable information.

In our practical work, we abstain from any behaviour that could raise doubts regarding the objective performance of our professional duties, and avoid conflict situations that could damage the reputation of human rights defenders.

Human rights defenders respect the work of the media and help in obtaining reliable information and raising public awareness of human rights activities.

#### **6. Non-violence**

We consider it unacceptable to resort to violence to achieve our goals. In their human rights work, human rights defenders do not resort to violence and threats of violence.

#### **7. Free assistance and non-commercial activities**

Human rights defenders make no profit. Human rights assistance (legal aid, consulting, providing information, medical aid, psychological assistance, etc.) is provided to victims of human rights violations free of charge. Human rights organizations seek to involve volunteers.

#### **8. Integrity and responsibility**

Human rights defenders take on responsibility for the results of their work and the proper performance of their professional tasks.

Human rights defenders seek to exclude any actions influenced by any personal, property (financial) and other interests that could impede fair human rights work.

Human rights defenders seek to comply with the rules of business conduct, communication, ethics and diligence while dealing with colleagues, business partners and victims of human rights violations.

### **9. Solidarity and cooperation of human rights defenders**

Human rights defenders share information and cooperate with each other and civil society organizations to achieve common goals based on the principles of good partnership, mutual respect and mutual assistance.

In case of unlawful persecution against a human rights defender, a group of human rights defenders, or a human rights organization, solidary protection and support actions will be priority activities for other human rights defenders and human rights organizations.

### **10. Respect for privacy and dignity**

Human rights defenders respect the human dignity of each person and observe the rights of individuals, including the right to privacy. Human rights defenders should maintain honest and confidential relations with victims of human rights violations, should be polite, tactful and considerate when communicating with them, and prevent actions that could degrade their honour and dignity or discriminate them. Human rights defenders refrain from actions that could deteriorate the victim's situation, and use the most effective and promising remedies to protect each victim of human rights violation.

### **11. Confidentiality and protection of personal data**

Human rights defenders do not disclose confidential information at their disposal and take measures to protect the personal data of individuals who apply to them for assistance. Human rights defenders have no right to use the information, obtained in the course of human rights work, for their personal purposes.

The confidential information includes:

- the fact of applying for assistance; information about the person who applied for consultations, legal aid or protection; the relevant circumstances of the case and documents related to the case, as well as the scope and forms of the assistance provided, unless such person gave their consent to the disclosure of this information;
- information that could harm employees, volunteers, partner organizations;
- other information provided under non-disclosure terms.

Confidential information can be disclosed only upon the consent of the person applying for assistance.

We proceed from the premise that the State should not interfere with the professional activities of human rights defenders and must respect the confidentiality of their communications with those to whom they provide legal assistance.

## **12. Professionalism**

Human rights defenders seek to improve their professional knowledge, gain practical experience and perform their duties competently and in a professional manner.

## **13. Assisting the State and other actors in protection of human rights**

Human rights defenders seek to assist the State and other actors in the protection and promotion of human rights, and for this purpose human rights defenders interact with them in their activities. Interaction with the public authorities and officials is based on the principles of social partnership, the value of equitable dialogue, and maintaining the independence and freedom of action while upholding human rights and freedoms.

## **14. Independence from political parties**

We strive for political neutrality and observe the impartiality that rules out the possibility for decisions of political parties to influence our human rights work.

The heads of human rights organizations cannot be members of the governing bodies of political parties.

## **15. Conflict of interest**

Conflict of interest is a contradiction between the property and other interests of a human rights defender, including those resulting from their participation in the activities of political parties, which could affect their human rights work, human rights organization, other human rights defender, or victims of human rights violations.

Human rights defenders must avoid situations of a potential or an actual conflict of interest. Human rights organizations should provide for a public procedure to settle a conflict of interest. When resolving a conflict of interest, the interests of all the parties concerned should be equally respected and taken into account.

# Explanatory Note

---

**The purpose of the National Human Rights Movement**<sup>1</sup> is to comprehensively promote the formation of such a model of relations between the public authorities and an individual in Belarus that would ensure the greatest respect for the human dignity and the observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, in accordance with the universal international standards of human rights and the rule of law.

This means that, in addition to building democratic institutions in the country, it is extremely important to ensure that human rights workers observe the certain professional and ethical standards. The need to create a self-regulation scheme in the human rights sector in Belarus is based both on the internal needs of organizations to improve the efficiency of their work, and on the importance of raising the profile of and the trust to human rights defenders in the society.

Therefore, a group of human rights organizations decided to develop the ethics and behaviour standards for human rights defenders - the Principles of Human Rights Work in Belarus - and to create effective mechanisms to present the document to the public.

The development team based the ethical principles for human rights defenders in Belarus on the international experience in creating of self-regulation schemes for civil society organizations, and took into account the situation in which the Belarusian human rights defenders work.

The following human rights defenders contributed to the development of the document: **Raisa Mikhaylovskaya**, **Tatiana Ageyeva**, **Vladimir Bukshtynov** (Belarusian Documentation Centre), **Tatiana Revyaka**, **Anna Gerasimova**, **Vladimir Yavorsky** (Barys Zvozskau Belarusian Human Rights House), **Oleg Ageyev** (Belarusian Association of Journalists), **Yuriy Chausov** (Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs of Belarus), **Pavel Sapelko** (*Viasna Human Rights Centre*), **Dmitry Chernykh**, **Harry Pogonyaylo** (Belarusian Helsinki Committee), **Elena Tonkacheva** (*Lawtrend*).

The draft document was discussed in six focus groups with the participation of more than seventy Belarusian human rights defenders from all the regions of the country. The participants represented more than 20 organizations or participated in the document development process in their personal capacity.

The document is intended for the Belarusian human rights organizations, both registered and unregistered, other civic associations, initiative groups, civil society structures and their coalitions, individuals and other entities engaged in the protection and promotion of the universally recognized human rights.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Belarusian Human Rights Movement Strategy. Adopted by the II Belarusian Human Rights Forum (25.09.2010, Vilnius).