

Refugee Rights Defender Charged For Assisting Syrian Asylum Seekers At The Latvia-Belarus Border

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On 28 February 2024, the first court hearing in the trial of woman human rights defender Ieva Raubiško is scheduled to take place at the Rezekne court in Latvia. The woman human rights defender has been charged with “organising intentional illegal crossing of the state border for a group of people” under the Article 20 and Article 284/2 of the Latvian Criminal Code. She is being prosecuted for assisting a group of asylum seekers at the Latvia-Belarus border in January 2023 and working to ensure that they would not be deported from Latvia in violation of a decision of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).

[Ieva Raubiško](#) is a woman human rights defender who works with the people on the move in Latvia. A social anthropologist by education, Raubiško has been following the situation of irregular migrants and asylum seekers at the Latvia-Belarus border since July 2021. Having volunteered for the non-governmental organisation Gribu palīdzēt bēgļiem (GPB – I Want to Help Refugees) for several years, Raubiško joined GPB as a project coordinator/advocacy officer in September 2022.

[Gribu palīdzēt bēgļiem](#) began as a Facebook group in September 2015, gathering people who wanted to actively help refugees arriving in Latvia largely from the war-torn Syria and Iraq. In April 2016, GPB was registered as an association with the aim of providing practical support to refugees in the process of socio-economic integration. Today the organisation not only provides practical support to asylum seekers and refugees, but also works to raise public and political awareness of their rights and needs, and advocates for the necessary improvements in the integration system to promote the inclusion of newcomers in the Latvian society.

In December 2023, Ieva Raubiško was officially presented with the charges she is facing under Article 284/2 of the Latvian Criminal Code (LCC). Initially the woman human rights defender and a fellow activist, founder of GPB, Egils Grasmanis were under investigation for potential engagement in organising illegal movement of a group of persons across the Latvian state border under Article 285/2 of the LCC. Later the charges against Egils Grasmanis were dropped, while the case was continued against Ieva Raubiško with a lesser charge of organising an «intentional illegal crossing of people» instead of «illegal movement of people» which would amount to human smuggling. If found guilty, Ieva Raubiško may face up to two years imprisonment for her human rights work of trying to ensure the protection of the rights of people on the move.

On 31 December 2022, a group of Syrian asylum seekers who entered Latvia across its border with Belarus reached out to GPB to seek humanitarian aid and help in claiming asylum in Latvia. Unable to meet the group in the border zone, due to restrictions posed by the state of emergency, in force since August 2021, GPB called for an ambulance to assist the group.

In early January 2023, the same group of Syrian asylum seekers contacted GPB again, saying that they had been pushed back by Latvian border guards to Belarus after receiving the necessary medical care. The group had experienced several pushbacks from Latvia to Belarus and back since mid-December 2023. The group authorised Ieva Raubiško to raise their case with the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). The human rights defender applied to the ECtHR with a request for interim measures under Article 39 to prevent deportation of the group of asylum seekers.

On 11 January 2023, the ECtHR instructed Latvia “not to deport several Syrian citizens from the territory of Latvia until 8 February 2023, as well as to provide them with food, water, clothing, adequate medical assistance and temporary housing.” Ieva Raubiško and Egils Grasmanis went to the border area to follow the implementation of the interim measures and to ensure that the Syrian group would not be forcibly sent back to Belarus. When they met with the group in the territory of Latvia they immediately notified the State Border Guard and the Emergency Medical Service. Upon arrival, the border guards apprehended Ieva Raubiško and Egils Grasmanis and the asylum seekers. Two of the asylum seekers were taken to the hospital. Ieva Raubiško and her colleague were questioned by the Border Guard criminal investigators. Administrative proceedings were started against them for entering the border area without a special permit, followed by a criminal investigation.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned about the case against the human rights defender Ieva Raubiško in what appears to be a reprisal for the legitimate and peaceful human rights work being carried out by the human rights defender.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities of Latvia to:

1. Drop the charges against Ieva Raubiško, as she has been targeted solely as a result of her legitimate and peaceful human rights work;
2. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Latvia are able to carry out their human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of restrictions.

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