



## **Further crackdown in Belarus: Office of Viasna confiscated and sealed**

28/11/2012

The Civil Solidarity Platform<sup>1</sup> condemns the confiscation, on 26 November, of the office of its member in Belarus, the Human Rights Centre *Viasna* (Spring). Early on that day, bailiffs accompanied by police entered the office and ordered that it be evacuated by the staff present, removed and confiscated all equipment including shelves, desks, stove, and blinds and curtains from the windows. The office was then sealed off by the police.

This new attack on the right to freedom of association is the last of a series of measures taken by the Belarus authorities to stifle dissent and outlaw, harass and prosecute human rights NGOs and their representatives. While the right to freedom of association is protected by the Belarus constitution, the authorities are violating the country's supreme law as well as international standards that Belarus has ratified under the U.N. and commitments it has undertaken as a member of the OSCE.

The confiscation of the office was conducted on the basis of a court decision pronounced a year ago, on 24 November 2011, against the Chairman of *Viasna*, FIDH Vice-President and famous human rights defender Ales Bialiatsky. He was convicted to 4.5 years in prison and confiscation of all his property on charges of gross tax evasion. These charges were levelled against him because he had opened bank accounts in his name in Vilnius and in Warsaw so as to make it possible to receive funding from international donors for the human rights work of his organisation after it was de-registered in 2003 and, having lost its legal status, prevented from having a bank account in Belarus. His trial was marked by blatant violations of the right of defence and the right to a fair trial. No international observers were granted a visa to enter Belarus to observe the trial, among those denied entry were staff members of International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) and the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, both members of the Civil Solidarity Platform. The confiscated apartment has been the premise of *Viasna*'s activity for more than twelve years.

Ales Bialiatsky was arrested on 4 August 2011, a few days after testifying at the European Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET). Since then the European Parliament and European External Action Service (EEAS), UN human rights bodies, Council of Europe and OSCE representatives have repeatedly called for Ales Bialiatsky's release, but to date the Belarusian authorities have persistently refused to re-consider their position. In addition he has been subjected to discriminatory treatment in prison, and various pretexts have been used to impose disciplinary measures on him and restrict his rights to receive food parcels and visits. Most recently, he was not allowed to receive necessary medicine for his medical condition and had his access to social contact with other prisoners limited.

The Civic Solidarity Platform condemns the new steps taken by the authorities aimed at putting an end to the activities of the famous NGO that has continued to courageously carry out its work during the incarceration of its head in spite of the harassment its members have been increasingly subjected to over the last year.

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<sup>1</sup> The Civic Solidarity Platform consists of more than 40 non-governmental, human rights organizations from Europe, Central Asia and North America. For more information, please visit <http://www.civicsolidarity.org>.

Viasna has reacted to the closure of their office by issuing a statement declaring “The reprisals against the head and the members of the HRC “Viasna”, as well as the confiscation of assets, will not stop our activities. All victims of human rights violations can still count on our support and assistance. We will continue defending the human rights values, struggle for their respect by the Belarusian authorities and inform the Belarusian society and the international community about the real situation of human rights in Belarus.”

The Civic Solidarity Platform expresses its full support to Viasna’s staff and calls on the Belarus authorities to drop all charges against Ales Bialiatsky and release him unconditionally, to allow Viasna to continue its work in its current office premises and to stop the ongoing repression against the staff of this organisation and all other human rights NGOs in the country. We further urge the international community to support our demands and persist in calling upon President Lukashenka’s government to refrain from any further attempts at stifling civil society.

**On behalf of the Civic Solidarity Platform:**

International Partnership for Human Rights, IPHR (Belgium)  
Norwegian Helsinki Committee  
Freedom Files (Russia)  
Center for Civil Liberties (Ukraine)  
Bulgarian Helsinki Committee  
Center for National and International Studies (Azerbaijan)  
People in Need, PIN (Czech Republic)  
Moscow Helsinki Group (Russia)  
Public Verdict Foundation (Russia)  
Human Rights House Foundation, HRHF  
Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law  
Human Rights Club (Azerbaijan)  
Index on Censorship (United Kingdom)  
Netherlands Helsinki Committee  
Helsinki Committee in Armenia  
Center for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights, CDDHR (Russia)  
Analytical Center for Interethnic Cooperation and Consultations (Georgia)  
Albanian Helsinki Committee  
Belarusian Helsinki Committee  
Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (Poland)  
Legal Transformation Center (Belarus)  
Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia  
Belarusian Human Rights House (Lithuania)  
Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association  
ARTICLE 19  
Notabene (Tajikistan)  
Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union  
Golos Svobody (Voice of Freedom) Public Foundation (Kyrgyzstan)  
Helsinki Citizens' Assembly – Vanadzor (Armenia)  
Hungarian Helsinki Committee  
Kharkiv regional foundation Public Alternative (Ukraine)  
Foundation of Regional Initiatives (Ukraine)  
PromoLex (Moldova)  
Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan  
Kosova Rehabilitation Centre for Torture Victims- KRCT