

Statement by Belarusian human rights organizations in connection with the recognition of Viasna as an extremist organization

We, the Belarusian human rights organizations, strongly protest against the declaration of the Viasna Human Rights Center as an extremist organization and express our solidarity with our colleagues.

On August 23, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus ruled to declare the Viasna Human Rights Center as an extremist organization. According to this ruling, a group of individuals associated with the Viasna Human Rights Center were engaging in extremist activities, including through online resources with the same name and its regional branches. The reason behind this ruling was “activities aiming to undermine Belarusian sovereignty and public safety, as well as discredit and insult public officials,” BelTA (Belarusian Telegraph Agency) [reports](#). The group operations and over 30 related online resources have been banned in Belarus. The Ministry’s ruling provides grounds for potential criminal charges leading to up to seven years of imprisonment for individuals involved with or transferring information or resources to Viasna.

The Viasna Human Rights Center is one of Belarus’s oldest and most respected human rights groups and has assisted tens of thousands of Belarusian citizens who have faced political repression. The organization and its members have been awarded numerous prestigious human rights awards, including the UN Human Rights Prize for 2023. The founder of the Center, Ales Bialiatski, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022.

The government’s decision to label the Viasna Human Rights Center as an “extremist organization” is politically motivated persecution linked to the peaceful exercise of individual rights and freedoms. We see it as yet another move in a broader strategy to destroy civil society organizations, the Belarusian human rights movement, and the arbitrary application of Belarusian anti-extremism legislation to suppress civil activism. We regard it as another measure pressuring the legitimate human rights work of the particular organization – Viasna Human Rights Center, following, among other things, the administrative and criminal persecution of its leadership, members, and volunteers and labeling its information resources as extremist.

The national legislation against extremism is not in line with international standards. It lacks legitimate objectives and is broadly and vaguely defined, giving excessive discretion to state authorities and allowing them to misuse legal provisions for political repression. The state justifies labeling organizations engaged in peaceful human rights work and defending public interests as extremists based on concocted national security and public order reasons when the actual motive is to suppress any dissent against the government’s actions.

We emphasize that declaring the Viasna Human Rights Center and other organizations as extremist is an unacceptable interference with the right to freedom of expression and association. These are rights guaranteed by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which the Republic of Belarus is a party. It also breaches the rights established in the UN’s Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and the Constitution of Belarus.

Given the above, we demand the Belarusian authorities:

1. Revoke the decision, labeling extremist groups the Viasna Human Rights Center and other civil society organizations.

2. Align the legislation on counteracting extremism with international human rights standards.
3. End the practice of labeling organizations and initiatives as extremist without reasonable and proportional grounds, and stop declaring content informing the public about human rights situations as extremist material.

We call on human rights defenders and civil society organizations worldwide to show solidarity with the Viasna Human Rights Center and the Belarusian human rights movement. We urge international bodies and organizations to address the human rights violations in Belarus appropriately, engage the Belarusian authorities, and demand the observance of international human rights commitments, ending the arbitrary designation of organizations as extremist and their content as extremist materials.

Lawtrend
Belarusian Helsinki Committee
PEN Belarus
Legal initiative
Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
Human Constanta
Belarusian Association of Journalists
Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House