

Statement by the Human Rights Coalition regarding the designation of PEN Belarus, Human Constanta, and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee as extremist formations

In light of the intensifying practice of designating Belarusian human rights organizations as extremist formations, we, a coalition of Belarusian and international human rights organizations, state the following:

Over the past month, the Belarusian authorities have designated three well-known Belarusian human rights organizations as extremist formations: **PEN Belarus** (KGB decision of 27 February 2026 No. 4/41-61), **Human Constanta** (KGB decision of 11 March 2026 No. 4/41-63), and the **Belarusian Helsinki Committee** (KGB decision of 31 March 2026 No. 4/41-72). The activities of these organizations and their associated information resources are banned in Belarus. The work of human rights defenders connected to these organizations, as well as any form of interaction with them or their resources, has been criminalized and entails criminal liability at minimum under the articles “Creation of an extremist formation or participation in it” (Article 361-1 of the Criminal Code) and “Aiding extremist activity” (Article 361-4 of the Criminal Code), depending on the level of involvement.

PEN Belarus is a human rights organization founded in 1989 that defends Belarusian writers, translators, literary scholars, publicists, intellectuals, and all those who create and disseminate culture. It protects freedom of expression and its practitioners, cultural and civil rights and freedoms, humanistic values, and identity, while creating and providing space for the development of Belarusian culture, creativity, and intercultural dialogue. PEN Belarus is part of PEN International, a co-founder of the Belarusian Human Rights House named after Barys Zvozkau, and a member of the coalition of Belarusian human rights organizations. It was liquidated by a decision of the Supreme Court of Belarus on 9 August 2021. Between 2020 and 2022, the organization endured inspections by the Ministry of Justice, searches, liquidation, website blocking, and relocation of its core team to Warsaw — but it has not ceased its work for a single day and continues it today.

Human Constanta is a Belarusian human rights organization founded in 2015 that addresses contemporary human rights challenges. Its work focuses on three main areas: protecting the rights of foreign citizens and stateless persons, promoting non-discrimination and human rights education, and advancing digital rights and freedoms. Its mission is to promote public interest and collective action in response to modern human rights challenges. The organization provides legal assistance, conducts monitoring and analysis, compares Belarusian legislation with international standards, and disseminates this knowledge through educational initiatives.

Belarusian Helsinki Committee is one of the oldest human rights organizations in Belarus, operating since 1995. Its founders include prominent public and cultural figures such as Vasil Bykau (the first chair of its supervisory board), Ryhor Baradulin, Radzim Haretski, Svetlana Alexievich, and Hennady Buraukin, among others. In 2021, the Supreme Court of Belarus stripped the organization of its registration; it continues to operate in exile. In July 2022, despite the liquidation decision, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee obtained consultative status with the UN ECOSOC, becoming the first Belarusian NGO to do so. For over 30 years, it has defended human rights in Belarus, working toward systemic change and the humanization of Belarusian legislation.

The decision by the authorities to designate these organizations as “extremist formations” constitutes politically motivated persecution related to the peaceful exercise of rights and freedoms. It is part of a broader state policy aimed at suppressing dissent. This policy includes the repression of civic activism, the stigmatization of civil society organizations in general, and of the Belarusian human rights movement in particular. We recall that in 2023, the Human Rights Center “Viasna” and the Belarusian Association of Journalists were also designated as extremist formations. Over the past five years, the resources of many human rights organizations and initiatives have been labeled as “extremist materials.” Since 2020, a key instrument of this policy has been the formalization and institutionalization of repression through legislation.

We once again emphasize that Belarusian legislation on countering extremism does not comply with international human rights standards. It lacks legitimate aims and is formulated in broad and vague terms, granting excessive discretion to state bodies and enabling arbitrary application for the purpose of political repression. Under the pretext of protecting national security and public order, the state labels organizations engaged in peaceful human rights work as “extremist,” while the true objective is to suppress any dissent against the authorities’ actions.

Thus, the designation of PEN Belarus, Human Constanta, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, and other organizations as “extremist formations” constitutes unacceptable interference with the exercise of freedom of expression and freedom of association, rights guaranteed by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which the Republic of Belarus is a party. It also violates rights enshrined in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus. Moreover, the designation of human rights organizations as “extremist formations” constitutes an act of persecution that may amount to a crime against humanity under the Rome Statute.

Furthermore, by criminalizing human rights activity, the authorities create intolerable conditions for practicing this profession. This constitutes a violation of the right to work of human rights defenders as a professional group, particularly the freedom to choose one’s occupation as guaranteed by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Such actions effectively amount to a ban on the profession.

At the same time, this form of persecution against organizations operating in exile is part of a pattern of transnational repression.

In light of the above, we demand that the Belarusian authorities:

- Revoke the decisions designating PEN Belarus, Human Constanta, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, as well as other civil society organizations, as “extremist formations” or “extremist organizations.”
- Bring legislation on countering extremism into compliance with international human rights standards.
- End the practice of designating organizations and initiatives as extremist without reasonable and proportionate grounds, as well as the practice of labeling information resources aimed at informing the public about the human rights situation as extremist materials.

We call on human rights defenders and civil society organizations in different countries to show solidarity with the Belarusian human rights movement. We also urge international bodies and organizations to provide an appropriate assessment of human rights violations in Belarus, to demand that the Belarusian authorities comply with their international human rights obligations, and to end the arbitrary practice of designating organizations as “extremist” and their resources as “extremist materials.”

Belarusian Helsinki Committee

Lawtrend

Human Rights Center “Viasna”

PEN Belarus

Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House

Belarusian Association of Journalists

Legal Initiative

Lawyers’ Rights Watch Canada

International Bar Association’s Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI)

Human Rights House Foundation

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International Federation for Human Rights