

WHY ACCUSATIONS AGAINST VIASNA HRC ARE BASELESS

Several members of Human Rights Center Viasna, including its Chairman Ales Bialiatski, and FIDH VP Valiantsin Stefanovic were charged with tax evasion on a large scale. The exact nature of the accusations is not clear, in part because Viasna's lawyers were forced to sign non-disclosure agreements.



Viasna was deprived of NGO registration in 2003 and has since then not been a taxable legal entity in Belarus. The authorities denied all subsequent attempts to register the organisation. Therefore, it was impossible for Viasna to pay taxes as an organisation.



Viasna's employees could not pay taxes individually either, since working for an unregistered organisation has been subject to criminal prosecution before 2018 (and administrative liability since then).

The laws in Belarus thus make it nearly impossible for human rights defenders to operate legally, in violation of both Belarus Constitution and international law. The UN Human Rights Committee has held that dissolution of Viasna violated freedom of association and highlighted that no law should criminalise or delegitimise human rights work on account of the origin of its funding.



The charges against Viasna are similar to those brought against its chairman Ales Bialiatski in 2011. According to the UN, his rights were also violated by the Belarus authorities.

Tax fraud accusations resonate with Belarus' general population, which has struggled financially under Lukashenka's rule, but they are nothing but a propaganda stunt. The Belarusian authorities have forced Viasna into making a choice between operating in a legal vacuum or dissolving. Now, after having deprived the organisation of its legal status and its employees of an opportunity to work legally, they are retaliating against Viasna for having chosen to continue to defend human rights of Belarusians. The real motive behind this prosecution is to eradicate civil society in Belarus under the guise of fighting tax fraud.

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