

PRESS RELEASE - THE OBSERVATORY

BELARUS: Human Rights Centre “Viasna” searched and its President arrested

Paris-Geneva, January 17, 2011. *The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a joint programme of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), expresses its deep concern about the arbitrary arrest of Mr. Ales Bialiatski, President of the Human Rights Centre Viasna and FIDH Vice-President, in the context of an intense crackdown on independent civil society following protests calling for free and fair elections in Belarus.*

On January 17, 2011, at approximately 3 p.m., three officers belonging to the Committee for State Security (KGB), searched the headquarters of the Human Rights Centre (Viasna), in Minsk, in the presence of two witnesses, as required by the law. It is reported that the police had a search warrant related to the events that took place in the aftermath of the elections on December 19, 2010. The KGB officers asked other Viasna staff to leave the premises, seized a computer and arrested Mr. **Ales Bialiatski**. His family and colleagues have not heard from Mr. Ales Bialiatski since then.

According to testimonies, the same KGB officers had also knocked on the door of Mr. Bialiatski's home before.

The Observatory recalls that on December 20, 2010, in the aftermath of election day, 15 KGB officers had raided the headquarters of Human Rights Centre “Viasna”, arrested ten Viasna members and seized all computers and documentation¹. All Viasna members were released on the same day.

At that time, Viasna members were in the organisation's premises to analyse the data that had been collected the day before from 600 election monitors across the country, in the framework of the “Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections” monitoring project, run jointly by Viasna and the Belarus Helsinki Committee (BHC).

The Observatory firmly condemns the arbitrary arrest of Mr. Ales Bialiatski, which occurs in the context of general repression against peaceful activists calling for free and fair elections across the country or anyone suspected of being critical of the authorities.

The Observatory calls on the Belarusian authorities to guarantee in all circumstances the physical and psychological integrity of Mr. Ales Bialiatski and release him immediately and unconditionally, since this arbitrary arrest only aims at sanctioning his human rights activities.

The Observatory urges the Belarusian authorities to refrain from harassing human rights defenders, and to guarantee their rights to freedom association and expression. The Observatory more generally calls upon urges the Belarusian authorities to conform in all circumstances with the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as international and regional human rights instruments ratified by Belarus.

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¹ See Observatory's Press Release, December 20, 2010. The ten persons were lawyers **Valentin Stefanovich** and **Vladimir Labkovich** and Mr. **Andrey Paluda**, Mr. **Zmitser Salaeu**, Mr. **Siarzhuk Sys**, Mr. **Uladzimir Mikalaeu**, Mr. **Aleg Zhlutka**, Mr. **Kanstantsin Staradubets**, Mr. **Vital Charniauski** and Ms. **Nasta Loyka**.