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21 August 2023

Belarus: Homiel branch of human rights organisation Viasna labelled as extremist organisation

On 14 August 2023, the Belarusian Committee for State Security (KGB) listed the Homiel branch of the **Human Rights Centre Viasna (HRC Viasna)** as an extremist organisation, and added the Homiel branch's website and social media accounts to the Republic's List of Extremist Content. The declaration of the Homiel branch of HRC Viasna and its online content as extremist exposes those who engage with this branch of the human rights organisation to risks of administrative and criminal prosecution.

The [Human Rights Centre Viasna \(HRC Viasna\)](#) is a human rights organisation based in Belarus, which was founded in 1996 by human rights defender and activist [Ales Bialiatski](#). The organisation works to promote human rights, provides practical assistance to civic initiatives for the legal defence of citizens, and conducts research into the state of civil society and legal defence in Belarus. HRC Viasna plays a prominent role in the protection of human rights in Belarus, especially after the 2020 presidential election and subsequent crackdown on the civil society. HRC Viasna provides legal assistance to political prisoners and their families and documents violations of human rights in Belarus. In 2022, Ales Bialiatski, the chairperson of HRC Viasna, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The Homiel branch of HRC Viasna was established in 2013 to protect and promote human rights in the region of Homiel.

On 9 August 2023, the Belarusian KGB issued a decision "On recognising a group of citizens as an extremist formation and banning its activities," declaring the Homiel branch of HRC Viasna as an extremist formation and adding them to the "list of organisations involved in extremist activities." Subsequently, on 14 August 2023, the KGB also added the social media accounts and website of the Homiel branch of HRC Viasna to the Republic's List of Extremist Content. Being included in the roster of extremist formations not only puts human rights defenders from the Homiel branch of HRC Viasna at risk, but also anyone who engages with them in any way, including by subscribing to or following their social media accounts. The Belarusian authorities have demonstrated a [pattern](#) of prosecuting individuals for engaging with so-called "extremist resources" online, even before the KGB listed them as extremist, under the offences of "creating and/or participation in an extremist formation," "facilitating extremist activities," and "financing extremist activities" as per Articles 361-1, 361-4, and 361-2 of the Criminal Code of Republic of Belarus.

According to Article 19.11 of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Republic of Belarus, distribution, storage, production, or transportation of products recognised as "extremist materials" is an administrative offence, thus subjecting various persons to risks of prosecution. The types of prosecution range from financial penalties of varied amounts (up to EUR 5,000) to administrative arrests of up to 15 days. Law enforcement authorities are also authorised to seize so-called weapons of the crime, ranging from phones and laptops to essentially anything that mentions the Homiel branch of HRC Viasna.

Since the mass protests that took place after the contentious August 2020 presidential elections in Belarus, the national authorities have been systemically targeting human rights defenders and their organisations with reprisals on an unprecedented scale, limiting almost all possibilities for in-country human rights work. More recently, the country's authorities have targeted human rights

organisations as “extremists,” potentially exposing anyone engaging with such organisations to fines, detentions and criminal prosecution.

Front Line Defenders condemns the listing of the Homiel branch of HRC Viasna and its online content as extremist, as it believes it to be a reprisal against the human rights organisation’s legitimate and non-violent human rights work. Front Line Defenders urges the Belarusian authorities to immediately and unconditionally overturn its decision to list the human rights organisation and its content as extremist and to stop using security laws to justify the prosecution of human rights defenders and organisations.

Front Line Defenders calls upon the authorities in Belarus to:

1. Immediately overturn the decision to declare the Homiel branch of HRC Viasna as an extremist organisation;
2. Immediately and unconditionally de-list the social media accounts of the Homiel branch of HRC Viasna from the Republic’s List of Extremist Content;
3. Refrain from using security laws to target human rights defenders, journalists and lawyers, and their respective human rights organisations;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Belarus can carry out their human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, in line with Belarus’ international human rights obligations and commitments.