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## **Belarus evicts leading human rights organization**

A leading Belarusian human rights NGO had its office confiscated in the capital Minsk on Monday, in what Amnesty International called a blatant violation of Belarus' international human rights obligations.

Representatives of the Ministry of Justice, police and a city gas company arrived at the Minsk office of Human Rights Centre Viasna on Monday morning to close it down and seal off the premises.

The eviction – which comes shortly after Belarus denied an Amnesty International representative access to the country – was part of a sentence imposed on Viasna's chair Ales Bialiatski a year ago.

“The confiscation of Viasna's office is a blatant violation of Belarus' international human rights obligations to respect and protect the right to freedom of association,” said David Díaz-Jogeix, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Europe and Central Asia Programme.

“The right to form associations – even if they peacefully promote ideas that differ with popular opinion in society and the government – is a basic human right and a cornerstone of any democratic society. The Belarusian Constitution guarantees everyone the right to freedom of association, yet every day we see the rights to freedom of association, assembly and expression violated in Belarus.”

Bialiatski – chair of Viasna as well as Vice-President of the International Federation for Human Rights – was arrested in central Minsk on 4 August 2011.

He was put on trial and on 24 November last year he was convicted of tax evasion “on a large scale” – relating to the use of personal bank accounts in Lithuania and Poland to support Viasna's human rights work in Belarus.

Amnesty International has declared Bialiatski a prisoner of conscience, and previously said his trial was unfair. The organization pointed out that Bialiatski was forced to open accounts abroad after the Belarusian authorities de-recognized Viasna in 2003, which barred the NGO from registering or opening a bank account in Belarus.

Bialiatski's conviction carried a four-and-a-half year prison sentence – which he is currently serving in a prison colony – as well as a fine and the confiscation of property, including Viasna's office.

On 17 November, Bialiatski's wife Natalia Pinchuk received a letter from the First of May district court in Minsk informing her that Viasna's office and all other property would be confiscated on 26 November.

“Neither repression against our leader and members of the Human Rights Centre Viasna, nor the confiscation of our office will stop the work,” said Valentin Stefanovich, Viasna's acting head.

“We are not going to stop any aspects of the legitimate human rights work of the organization. All victims of human rights violations can count on us as before for help and support,” Stefanovich said.

### **Stifling human rights work**

The confiscation of Viasna's office comes amid an increasingly difficult climate for those working to defend human rights in Belarus.

On 10 October the Belarusian authorities denied an Amnesty International researcher an entry visa for the first time since the organization began working on the country in the 1990s.

“Despite being given several opportunities, the Belarusian authorities have failed to clarify why the organization was denied a visa for the first time in more than a decade, leading us to conclude that the decision was politically motivated,” said Díaz-Jogeix.