

PRESS RELEASE - THE OBSERVATORY

BELARUS: Sentencing of Viasna Vice-Chairman, Valiantsin Stefanovich

Paris-Geneva, December 22, 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), condemns the sentencing of Mr. Valiantsin Stefanovich, Vice-Chairman of the Human Rights Centre "Viasna", by to a fine of 53 million rubles (about 4,840 euros).*

On December 16, 2011, another hearing took place against Mr. **Valiantsin Stefanovich**, during which the Partyzanski District Tax Inspection of Minsk sentenced him to a fine of 53 million rubles (about 4,840 euros). This case concerns the appeal lodged by Mr. Stefanovich against a ruling issued on October 19, 2011 requesting him to pay 4,75 millions Belarusian rubles (about 435 euros) in a case opposing him to the tax inspection of Minsk Partyzanski District, on the basis of Article 13.6 of the Administrative Code ("non-payment or incomplete payment of taxes").

The Tax Inspection alleged that Mr. Valiantsin Stefanovich failed to declare sums of money that it considered as "personal incomes". These sums, which were transferred on bank accounts in Lithuania by international organizations such as Amnesty International and the Danish Institute for Human Rights to support the activities of Viasna, were however used in the framework of the activities of the Human Rights Centre (HRC) "Viasna".

The authorities of Belarus were able to open this case against Mr. Stefanovich following the transfer of some banking information by the Lithuanian Ministry of Justice to the Ministry of Dues and Taxes of Belarus, as was the case for Director of Human Rights Center Viasna Ales Bialiatski, who was condemned to 4,5 years imprisonment on November 24, 2011. The fact that the information passed by the Lithuanian Ministry of Justice to the Belarusian authorities was incomplete (as stated in a letter from the Lithuanian Ministry of Justice dated of the end of August 2011) was not taken into account.

During the hearing, Mr. Stefanovich stressed that the administrative case against him was directly related to KGB pressure on the HRC "Viasna", and recalled the letter of the Head of the KGB to the Deputy Prosecutor General of Belarus dated November 3, 2010, which stated that the "radical opposition" was financed through "Viasna" and ordered an investigation on the activities of Viasna, and more particularly of Messrs. Bialiatski and Stefanovich. He also added that tax inspectors had been checking his accounts and those of his relatives for years, and had always failed to find any discrepancies between profits and expenditures.

Indeed, the Observatory recalls that the authorities have been hunting Mr. Stefanovich's resources over the past years. Since 2008, he has been asked on several occasions to provide his tax returns, including a tax form on the total income he received over 10 years, although he had already presented all those documents to the district tax inspection.

The Observatory further denounces the blatant violation of due process and fair trial standards. On October 19, 2011, the Deputy Chief of the Tax Inspection Ms. Elena Kutnik, had indeed presented a "decree on administrative violation" to Mr. Stefanovich, in which the verdict had been already filed and signed.

Mr. Valiantsin Stefanovich stated that he will appeal against the verdict.

The Observatory strongly denounces the sentencing of and the ongoing judicial harassment against Mr. Valiantsin Stefanovich, which merely seem to aim at sanctioning his human rights activities and the activities of HRC Viasna, and deplores the continuing violations of fair trial standards against him.



The Observatory
for the Protection
of Human Rights Defenders

The Observatory urges the Belarusian authorities to put an end to any kind of harassment - including at the judicial level - against Mr. Valiantsin Stefanovich as well as against all human rights defenders and, more generally, to conform with the provisions of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 9, 1998, and to ensure in all circumstances respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in accordance with international human rights standards and international instruments ratified by the Belarusian Republic.

For more information, please contact:

- **FIDH: Karine Appy / Arthur Manet: + 33 1 43 55 25 18**
- **OMCT: Delphine Reculeau: + 41 22 809 49 39**