



BELARUS:

The only registered regional human rights organisation under threat of dissolution

Minsk-Paris-Geneva, March 16, 2015 – On March 17, 2015, the Mahiliou Regional Court is expected to hear a lawsuit filed by the Main Department of Justice of the Mahiliou Regional Executive Committee to close down the only registered regional human rights organisation in the country – the Mahiliou Human Rights Center (MHRC). This lawsuit comes amidst an ongoing crackdown on human rights defenders by the Belarusian authorities.

The Mahiliou Human Rights Center has been for 17 years engaged in human rights activities in the region and today it is the only human rights organisation whose representative is a member of the public supervisory commission monitoring the activities of penal institutions. Over the years, the Mahiliou Human Rights Center has been repeatedly subjected to harassment from local authorities in an apparent desire to silence the human rights defenders' criticism of government officials.

Last September, the Main Department of Justice of the Mahiliou Regional Executive Committee filed a lawsuit with the Regional Court, asking to suspend the NGO's activities for three months, due to a lack of legal address. The lawsuit alleged that the Center "failed to provide within a specific period the documents required for the registration of changes regarding the legal address". Among other violations, the officials argued that the actual area of the premises rented by the NGO was 0.3 square meters less than that specified in the official documents, and ordered the founder of the organisation to amend the documents.

However, on October 1, the MHRC's leaders argued that they had signed a contract for a new legal address. Therefore, on November 4, the Mahiliou Regional Court issued a ruling to dismiss the case, considering the case as groundless. Nonetheless, on December 5, the lease agreement was unilaterally terminated by the real estate owner, which was the basis on which the Main Department of Justice issued a warning to the Mahiliou Human Rights Center, and later launched a procedure of dissolution. It should be stressed that the lack of a legal address is often pointed as a ground to refuse registration or to withdraw the registration for NGOs in Belarus.

Our organisations consider such actions as a serious interference of the authorities in the internal affairs of an NGO, and denounce the creation of artificial barriers to the legitimate activities of human rights defenders, which violate international human rights standards, in particular Art. 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Belarus' commitments to the OSCE.

This attempt to withdraw the registration of the Mahiliou Human Rights Center indicates the continuation of a policy of marginalization of human rights defenders in Belarus through outlawing their activities and denying the opportunity to perform their full-fledged work. It is worth recalling that Belarus has criminalised the activities of unregistered organisations receiving foreign funding, while human rights activists are harassed in connection with their professional activities. The expulsion from Belarus of a prominent human rights activist, Ms. **Alena Tankachova**, and a recent search with seizure of computer equipment carried out in the apartment of human rights defenders in Mahiliou, confirm this trend.

In this regard, our organisations urge the Belarusian authorities to:

- Immediately put an end to pressure on human rights defenders and human rights organisations in Belarus;
- Withdraw the lawsuit filed with the Mahiliou Regional Court calling for the dissolution of the Mahiliou Human Rights Center;
- Refrain from impeding the legitimate activities of human rights defenders and organisations in Belarus;
- Review its legislation on freedom of association-related matters, in a manner that is compliant with international human rights standards and OSCE commitments in line with the joint OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission Guidelines on Freedom of Association;

- Fully conform with the international obligations of Belarus in the field of human rights.

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