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for Human Rights

## **NEW REFUSAL TO REGISTER THE HUMAN RIGHTS GROUP "NASHA VIASNA": NO PROGRESS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY IN BELARUS**

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The Helsinki Committees are concerned about the recent rejection by the Belarusian authorities of the request for registration of "Nasha Viasna" Human Rights Center, the successor of the group "Viasna" that was forced to close by a decision of the Belarus Supreme Court more than five years ago, in October 2003. By doing so, Belarus shows its continued disregard for international human rights law despite assurances of positive change made recently by the authorities.

In August 2007, the United Nations Human Rights Committee decided that the forced closure of Viasna was a violation of Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and called upon the authorities to re-register the group. Viasna has since then re-applied twice for registration, without success. In the meantime, because of the unregistered status of the NGO, members of the well-known human rights organization are at risk of prosecution for their "illegal activities" as envisaged by article 193-1 of the Criminal Code of Belarus.

The rejection of the request of "Nasha Viasna" for registration happens at a time when the European Union is reconsidering its relations with Belarus. This new refusal to register the human rights organization is further evidence that the Belarusian authorities do not want to allow civil society groups to operate freely.

According to the Helsinki Committees, the justifications given by the Ministry of Justice for rejecting the registration of the NGO were not valid. For instance, the arguments that founders of "Nasha Viasna" have committed administrative offences in recent years and that they allegedly had no suitable premises for gathering were excessive demands that are not required by law. The refusal was signed by Aleh Slizheuski, head of the Public Organizations Department, listed earlier by the European Union as one of the individuals responsible for the persecution of civil society groups in Belarus.

The Helsinki Committees call upon the Belarusian authorities to re-consider the decision regarding the registration of "Nasha Viasna". The establishment of free conditions for legitimate activities of human rights groups would demonstrate that Belarus is ready to create space for civil society engagement and to undertake concrete steps toward improving respect for human rights.

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