



Civil society coalition denounces attack on the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee

1 October 2019

We, members of the Civic Solidarity Platform (CSP) condemn the recent attack on the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC), a CSP member and leading Bulgarian human rights NGO. We express our support and solidarity with the BHC and call on the Bulgarian government to ensure that the organization can carry out its legitimate and important human rights work without interference, intimidation and harassment.

On 30 September 2019, the Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO), which is part of Bulgaria's ruling government coalition, asked the Prosecutor General to initiate proceedings aiming at the de-registration of the BHC. VMRO representatives called for the withdrawal of BHC's legal status, which de-facto would mean that the organization would be prohibited from undertaking its work.

The BHC is a well-known and respected NGO that promotes respect for international human rights standards and protects the rights of victims of human rights violations, including minorities and migrants in Bulgaria. It provides submissions to courts, organizes seminars and other educational events for prosecutors and judges, and represents clients before domestic courts and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). In the opinion of the VMRO party, these activities constitute "interference with the judiciary", contrary to Article 117 of the Bulgarian Constitution, which provides that the judicial power is independent.

This is not the first time that this right-wing party initiates such actions. On two occasions in the past VMRO has used intimidation and harassment against BHC and its Director Krassimir Kanev, a leading human rights defender and international human rights expert. In 2017, party representatives asked the Prosecutor General to initiate prosecution against Mr. Kanev for "sabotage", with reference to his letter to the European Commission in which he expressed concern that the rights of LGBTI in Bulgaria are not guaranteed neither in law nor in practice. Earlier in 2014, the same party wrote to the National Revenue Agency requesting an investigation of the BHC's finances after the organization condemned the racist rhetoric of VMRO politicians against migrants. Although the first request was not acted upon by the Prosecutor General and the National Revenue Agency did not find any irregularity in the BHC's finances, these actions nevertheless put pressure on Mr. Kanev and the BHC.

It is disturbing that the VMRO, using its position in the ruling coalition where it has greater influence than previously, now again attacks the BHC and its leader. We are concerned that the party's new initiative may also reinforce suspicion and mistrust against the BHC and Mr. Kanev and, at worst, provoke other hostile actions against them. We recall that previously, in 2016, Mr. Kanev was physically attacked in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia by unknown perpetrators who were never found and prosecuted.

The developments described above are of particular concern in a country where intolerance is on the rise, and where the safety of those who work for the protection of minorities and the most vulnerable groups

of the population can no longer be taken for granted. We deplore the VMRO's actions and call on the Bulgarian government to abide by its international obligations with respect to freedom of association and other fundamental freedoms by immediately putting an end to the threats facing the BHC and ensuring the safety and operating capacity of the organization and its representatives.

Signed by the following CSP members:

International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR), Belgium
Public Verdict, Russia
Hungarian Helsinki Committee
Helsinki Committee of Armenia
Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights, Russia
SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, Russia
DRA Berlin, Germany
Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law
Public Association Dignity, Kazakhstan
Human Rights Movement "Bir Duino-Kyrgyzstan"
Public Foundation Golos Svobody, Kyrgyzstan
Association UMDPL, Ukraine
Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Poland
Promo LEX Association, Moldova
Human Rights Monitoring Institute, Lithuania
World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), Switzerland
Helsinki Citizens' Assembly – Vanadzor, Armenia
Macedonian Helsinki Committee
Citizens' Watch, Russia
ZARA, Austria
Netherlands Helsinki Committee
Center for Participation and Development, Georgia
Truth Hounds, Georgia/Ukraine
Coalizione Italiana per le Libertà e i Diritti civili (CILD), Italy
Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights YUCOM, Serbia
Protection of Rights without Borders, Armenia
Helsinki Association for Human Rights, Armenia
Belarusian Helsinki Committee
UNITED for Intercultural Action, Netherlands
Women of the Don, Russia
Center for Civil Liberties, Ukraine
Austrian Helsinki Association
Human Rights Matter, Germany
Social Action Centre, Ukraine
Moscow Helsinki Group
Norwegian Helsinki Committee
KRF Public Alternative, Ukraine
Swiss Helsinki Committee
Crude Accountability, United States
Nota Bene, Tajikistan
Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan
Fair Trials, United Kingdom