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Human Rights and Democracy Report 2013 - Section XI: Human Rights in Countries of Concern - Belarus

The human rights situation in Belarus remained largely unchanged in 2013. The Belarusian government's systematic suppression of human rights continued, including the harassment of civil society, opposition politicians, journalists, human rights defenders and minority groups. The authorities released four political prisoners in 2013, leaving six at year's end. Two were subsequently re-arrested and a further custodial sentence imposed. Four new death sentences were passed, with no progress made on a moratorium on the death penalty. Amendments to the electoral code were passed in December which made it more difficult for opposition leaders to stand and campaign in the local elections in March 2014, and the presidential elections in 2015.

In 2013, the UK focused on maintaining the pressure on the regime to improve the conditions of human rights in Belarus. The UK, both bilaterally and through EU partners, pressed the Belarusian government on the death penalty, rule of law and political prisoners. Along with EU partners, we agreed to extend targeted sanctions for a further year. UK diplomats, along with other missions, monitored the trials of political prisoners.

The Belarusian government refused to cooperate with the UN Special Rapporteur, Miklos Harazsti, who was not allowed to enter the country. In his report on Belarus, he described the systemic and systematic restrictions on human rights. We successfully lobbied for an extension to his mandate at the UN Human Rights Council in June with an increased vote in favour of his re-appointment. The Minister for Europe, David Lidington, met relatives of political prisoners, as well as the Belarusian Deputy Foreign Minister, and reiterated the need for all political prisoners to be freed and rehabilitated.

It is unlikely that there will be any improvement in the human rights situation in Belarus in the next 12 months. The exception may be during the Ice Hockey World Championships in May, when the eyes of the international community will be on Belarus. However, any improvements are likely only to be temporary, especially with the presidential elections due to be held in 2015. The UK will continue to press for the release and rehabilitation of all political prisoners, and will support the application of sanctions until this is achieved. We will also continue to raise Belarus's human rights record at international bodies such as the UN, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Council of Europe. We will monitor the local elections in March 2014 to see if they are free and fair. We will also continue our support for civil society and human rights defenders in the country.

Elections

There is a history of tainted elections in Belarus, not least the 2010 presidential elections when opposition candidates were arrested, beaten up and imprisoned; one of whom, Mikalay Statkevich, is still in prison. Although there were no elections held in Belarus in 2013, the electoral code was amended by the parliament in December without any debate or public consultation.

The amendments mean that any prospective candidates now have to declare if they have a criminal record. There are limits on the amount of money that candidates can receive from the state and raise privately, and restrictive time limits on the raising and spending of these funds. Very few of the recommendations from the report by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human rights (ODIHR) on the 2012 parliamentary elections were incorporated into the legislation. None of the issues surrounding vote-counting in the 2012 ODIHR report were addressed. The UK will continue to press for these recommendations to be adopted in full.

Freedom of expression and assembly

Belarus rose 11 places to 157 (out of 179 countries) in the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index 2013, but remains the lowest-ranked European country.

The state continued to control most media organisations and restricted access to other media outlets. The website of the human rights NGO Viasna was hacked and blocked from public internet access, whilst the publishing house Logvinov had its license withdrawn for publishing the 2011 Belarus Press Photo book. This was declared by the authorities to be extremist material because it contained photos of the 2010 December elections and the Minsk bombing.

Independent journalists continued to be harassed and detained. Two were arrested for reporting on a visit to a nuclear construction site by opposition leaders, whilst four others were detained in connection with the Chernobyl Way rally, an annual event organised by opposition and environmental groups to mark the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident. Another journalist, Valery Usik, was charged with libel when he reported on corruption at a state agricultural company.

The state used the legislation passed in 2012 prohibiting “unauthorised mass rallies”, which can consist of as little as a single person, to prevent freedom of assembly. Political parties, demonstrators and civic activists were detained and either fined or imprisoned. Permission to hold any rally or “mass event”, no matter how innocuous or small, was rarely granted.

Even non-politicised protests were dealt with swiftly and harshly. A go-slow drive around the centre of Minsk in December by Belarusians to protest against a new car tax led to the organisers being arrested and their cars impounded. The social media site used to organise the event was closed down.

A number of preventative arrests took place where known opposition figures were detained for “swearing, hooliganism or resisting arrest” before key dates or anniversaries, and then released after the event had passed.

The state used these measures to restrict space for independent media, opposition parties and civil society, and to ensure that such groups were marginalised.

Human rights defenders

Space for human rights defenders also remained extremely restricted. They faced regular harassment from the authorities and were threatened with detention. Lawyers who defended political activists were threatened with the withdrawal of their licences.

Andrei Bondarenko, head of the human rights group Platform, was arrested and detained for five days for taking part in an unsanctioned gathering to remember a prisoner, Igor Pitchkin, who had died in police custody. The head of Viasna, Ales Bialiatski, remains in prison and was only allowed very limited contact with the outside world. His wife was regularly refused permission to see him.

The UK continued to support EU programmes for those who are harassed and threatened by the authorities.

Access to justice and the rule of law

Four political prisoners were released in 2013. Vasili Parfenkow was released in February, Zmitser Dashkevich in August, Aleksandr Frantskevich in September, and Pavel Severinets in October. All four were released having served their full sentences. None have been rehabilitated. Upon their release, they were placed under restrictive measures. Parfenkow was subsequently sentenced to another year's imprisonment for failing to adhere to these restrictive measures. All had been imprisoned for taking part in the December 2010 demonstrations over the presidential elections.

Political prisoners continue to face psychological and physical pressure in prison. One political prisoner, Mikalai Autukovich, cut his stomach in protest against the treatment he received at the hands of the prison authorities. In June, a Catholic Priest, Vladislav Lazar, was arrested by the security forces and was detained for six months whilst he was interrogated by the KGB. For several months, no one was told the reasons for his detention, or allowed access to him. He was finally released and put under house arrest in December, but was told that he would need to stand trial.

We raised the issue of political prisoners with the regime at every opportunity. Mr Lidington, raised the issue with the Belarusian Deputy Foreign Minister on 9 September in London, and urged their release and complete rehabilitation. The British Embassy also raised this with the Belarusian authorities in Minsk, along with our concerns over prison conditions. In addition, we supported efforts by human rights defenders to investigate and improve these conditions.

Together with EU partners, we agreed the further rollover of sanctions on 29 October to maintain pressure on the Belarusian government to release and rehabilitate all political prisoners.

Death penalty

Whilst no executions took place in 2013, two new death sentences were handed down and two more upheld, following appeals. In September, the Supreme Court upheld the death sentence passed against Pavel Selium in August 2012. In October, the death sentence passed on Aleksandr Grunov

for the murder of a girl was overturned by the Supreme Court, but was then subsequently reinstated on appeal by the Gomel regional court in December. In November, Eduard Lykov was sentenced to death for the murder of five people. A fourth person, Grigory Yuzepchuk, was sentenced to death in April for killing his cellmate in prison.

The UK, along with EU partners, continued to press for a moratorium on the death penalty leading to its abolition. The UK has also urged the Belarusian authorities to return the body of Vladislav Kavalyoua, one of the alleged metro bombers executed in March 2012, to his mother Lubou Kavalyoua. Executions in Belarus are carried out without any notification being given to the family, and the bodies are then secretly buried, causing more distress.

LGBT rights

The LGBT community suffered increased harassment from the regime in 2013. The Ministry of Justice denied registration to LGBT groups, and members of the LGBT community were regularly targeted by the security forces and brought in for questioning. The authorities threatened to stigmatise them by informing their colleagues, families, or friends of their sexual orientation. Gay clubs in Minsk and Vitebsk were raided, and those present were filmed and had their details collected. The clubs were then closed down.

Gay Pride week in Minsk was disrupted by the authorities who forced owners of venues, where events were due to be held, to withdraw at the last minute. Those events that did take place were raided by the police, and a request for a march through the city was turned down by the authorities. UK and EU missions sent messages of support to the LGBT community during Gay Pride week, and the British Embassy flew the rainbow flag.