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Republic of Belarus

Head of state: **Alyaksandr Lukashenka**

Head of government: **Andrey Kabyakou**

Severe restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression, of association and of peaceful assembly remained in place. The government continued to refuse co-operation with the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Belarus. At least four people were executed and four people were sentenced to death.

BACKGROUND

On 28 February, the EU lifted all its sanctions against persons and entities in Belarus except those against four former officials suspected of involvement in enforced disappearances committed in 1999-2000.

On 1 July, the government redenominated the value of the Belarusian ruble slashing four zeros, among other measures. This was a response to the continuing economic downfall partially prompted by the downturn in Russia, its principal trading partner.

Also in July, the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Belarus – established by the UN Human Rights Council in 2012 – was extended for a further year.

In September, the new Parliament was elected against the backdrop of severe restrictions on independent media and the political opposition. Only two parliamentarians regarded as representing political opposition were elected.

On 24 October, the first national Human Rights Strategy was adopted. It outlined legislative reforms, none of which addressed the death penalty, but promised "to consider" Belarus' interest in joining the European Convention on Human Rights and the creation of a national human rights institution.

DEATH PENALTY

On 18 April, Siarhei Ivanou was executed despite the pending review of his case at the UN Human Rights Committee. This was the first execution since November 2014.^[1] Around 5 November, Siarhei Khmialeuski, Ivan Kulesh and Hyanadz Yakavitski were executed. Death sentences in Belarus are typically carried out in secrecy and without notifying the family. The Supreme Court rejected the appeal of Siarhei Vostrykau on 4 October.^[2] Siarhei Vostrykau was awaiting the outcome of his plea for clemency from the President at the end the year; clemency had been granted only once in over 400 pleas since 1994.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The Law on Mass Media continued to severely restrict the right to freedom of expression and effectively subjected all media companies to government control. Local journalists working for foreign media were still required to obtain official accreditation, which was routinely delayed or refused arbitrarily.

In January, political blogger Eduard Palchys, known for his critical posts of the Belarusian and Russian authorities and who was residing in Ukraine, was arrested during a visit to Bryansk, Russia. He was remanded in custody by the Russian authorities until his extradition to Belarus on 7 June where he was placed in detention. On 28 October, he was found guilty of "inciting racial, national or religious hatred" and of the "distribution of pornography". He was given a non-custodial sentence on account of having been on remand since January, and was released in court. The hearings of his case were closed, but the courtroom was opened to the public when the sentence was announced.

SURVEILLANCE

The legal framework governing secret surveillance allowed the authorities to undertake wide-ranging surveillance with little or no justification. The System of Operative-Investigative Measures (SORM), a system of lawful interception of all electronic communications, allowed the authorities direct access to telephone and internet communications and associated data. The possible surveillance restricted human rights defenders, other civil society and political activists as well as journalists in exercising their human rights, including the rights to freedom of association, of peaceful assembly and of expression.^[3]

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

NGOs and political parties continued to face undue restrictions, including compulsory registration. Registration applications were frequently arbitrarily rejected for minute infractions or on other unexplained grounds. Under Article 193.1 of the Criminal Code, the founding of, or participation in the activities of, an unregistered organization remained a crime punishable by up to two years' imprisonment.

The restrictions imposed on former prisoners of conscience Mikalai Statkevich, Yury Rubtsou and four other activists, as a condition for their early release in 2015, remained in place.

FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

The Law on Mass Events, which prohibits any assembly or public protest unless authorized by the authorities, remained in place.

Civil society activist Pavel Vinahradau was placed under "preventive supervision" from 7 June to 13 September after he participated in four "unauthorized" peaceful street protests.^[4]

LEGAL, CONSTITUTIONAL OR INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

In October, the tax authorities reported that they had sent notices to over 72,900 individuals who, under the 2015 presidential decree "On preventing social dependency", were required to pay a special tax for being out of work for over 183 days in a given tax year. Failure to comply incurred fines or "administrative arrest" and compulsory community service which could amount to a form of forced labour.

1. Belarus: Amnesty International deplores the execution of Siarhei Ivanou ([EUR 49/4014/2016](#))

2. Further information: Belarus' last prisoner on death row at risk: Siarhei Vostrykau ([EUR 49/5274/2016](#)) Belarus: Further information: Gennadii Yakovitskii's death sentence upheld ([EUR 49/3890/2016](#))

3. It's enough for people to feel it exists: Civil society, secrecy and surveillance in Belarus ([EUR 49/4306/2016](#))

4. Belarus: Activist arbitrarily convicted for peaceful protest ([EUR 49/4317/2016](#))

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