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The human rights situation in Belarus did not significantly change during 2014. Human rights defenders (HRDs), opposition politicians and journalists are regularly harassed by security services. During the course of the year, three political prisoners were released: two at the end of their sentences, and another early without requiring a request for a pardon. Others remain in jail. Three death sentences were carried out, and there was no move towards a moratorium. There were at least forty preventative arrests in the month leading up to the Ice Hockey World Championships in Minsk in May; these were to prevent human rights activists and other members of civil society from being able to demonstrate in front of an international audience, or to mar the running of the championships. The Belarusian Parliament passed new laws in December, giving the Ministry of Information even greater control over the media.

There were a few positive steps taken by the government of Belarus in 2014. Along with the early release of a political prisoner, they held a workshop to discuss the possibility of establishing a National Human Rights Institute, which included representatives from civil society. However, no further work has been done since the workshop.

In 2014, the UK government maintained pressure on the government of Belarus to improve the standard of human rights in the country and to meet international standards. We focused on pressing for a moratorium on the death penalty and for improved freedom of expression.

The UK and other EU partners agreed to extend the restrictive measures regime for Belarus (which includes an arms embargo, asset freezes, and travel bans) until October 2015. UK ministers and officials continue to engage with human rights organisations and civil society organisations where possible; the UK will continue to provide any support it can to their work.

The Belarusian authorities continued refusing to cooperate with the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, Miklos Harazsti, who presented his report in October to the UN. He has still not been allowed access to Belarus. His report highlighted severe restrictions on civil society, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and HRDs, and the

criminalisation of many civil activities. The UK strongly supported a continuation of the Special Rapporteur's mandate in June, and continues to urge the government of Belarus to cooperate with him.

Elections

Local elections were held on 23 March 2014. Opposition parties, human rights organisations, and NGOs reported widespread violations and harassment, both during the campaign and on polling day.

Opposition parties and non-registered organisations reported that pressure was put on their candidates during both registration and campaigning. This resulted in mass withdrawals of potential candidates. Observers and HRDs also reported discrimination during the forming of constituency commissions, which were dominated by government representatives.

During the election, observers reported numerous breaches, including not being allowed to monitor the vote count, detentions, premature opening of ballot boxes, withdrawals of accreditation, voting without passports, and voting for relatives. In the final count, only a dozen opposition-related candidates were elected to local councils, out of more than 2,000 seats.

With the presidential elections taking place in 2015, it will be important to monitor these elections to determine whether they are free and fair. The authorities in Belarus have agreed to allow international election monitors from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights to observe the elections; the UK will take part in this. We will continue to monitor closely the internal human rights situation in the run-up to the elections, as well as any further restrictions on human rights, particularly on freedom of the media and on members of the opposition. Prior to the 2010 elections, there were signs of improving human rights. However, these were reversed on the eve of the elections with a violent crackdown and many arrests. One opposition politician arrested during that time, Mikalai Statkevich, remains in prison.

Freedom of Expression and Assembly

Freedom of expression and assembly continue to be restricted in Belarus. Laws on mass assembly make it illegal for even a single person to hold a demonstration on their own.

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatović, visited Belarus in 2014. At the end of her visit she called on the government of Belarus to end the practice of accreditation for all people working within the media, which currently leads to these individuals being subjected to monitoring by the authorities.

A new law was approved by the Belarusian government in December 2014, which will come into force on 1 January 2015, requiring all non-web-based media to register with the Ministry of Information. Online media do not have to register; however, the law provides that any online media can be blocked if they publish information deemed unsuitable by the authorities. The definition of "unsuitable" is vague and open to wide interpretation. On 20 December 2014, prior to the law's introduction, there was an indication as to how it would operate. Without warning, the authorities temporarily blocked a number of online media sites to prevent anti-government comment on the currency crisis.

The political pressure on independent journalists and media outlets appears to be increasing. Thirty journalists have been detained since the beginning of 2014. Charges were predominantly for working without accreditation, or for working with foreign media outlets. If convicted, heavy fines are imposed. One journalist was held on suspicion of espionage. Aleksandr Alesin, a military affairs journalist in Belarus, was arrested after he was seen meeting a diplomat based in Minsk. He was finally charged with cooperating with a foreign intelligence agency, and released on bail.

Freedom of expression continues to be restricted and a number of human rights activists and opposition activists have been detained, mostly for trivial activities such as handing out leaflets or displaying the old red and white Belarusian flag. A practice of handing down shorter sentences may seem more lenient but shorter sentences can be disruptive and can make it difficult for those sentenced to keep a job. Pavel Vinogradov, an opposition activist was arrested 15 times in 2014 and often for preventative measures.

Human Rights Defenders

Elena Tonkacheva, the Russian director of Belarus human rights NGO, LawTrend, was issued with a notice of deportation in November 2014, following her detention for an alleged speeding violation. She has never applied for Belarusian citizenship, but has lived in the country for 30 years. EU missions in Minsk raised this case with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as there are concerns she is being deported to prevent her from continuing to advocate for human rights in Belarus. She has appealed against the deportation.

Access to Justice and the Rule of Law

Former political prisoner and head of human rights organisation, Viasna, Ales Bialiatski, was released from prison in June 2014. He was not required to request a pardon to commute his sentence, but his civil and political rights have not been fully reinstated. The Foreign & Commonwealth Minister for Europe, David Lidington, along with the EU and other individual member states, welcomed the release of Ales Bialiatski. Mr Lidington also called for the unconditional release and rehabilitation of all political prisoners still held in Belarus. Two other long-term political prisoners were released in 2014. Both had come to the end of their sentence. Mikolai Autukhovich was released in April, but is still subject to 16 months' preventative surveillance. Eduard Lobau was released in December 2014, but is subject to a further year's preventative surveillance.

The early release of Ales Bialiatski did not signify any amnesty on political prisoners. None of the political prisoners released in 2014 were rehabilitated into society, and some face preventative surveillance and other controls imposed for a prolonged period after they are released. The authorities in Belarus continue to harass the remaining political prisoners who are coming towards the end of their sentences. This includes charging them with new minor offences to extend their sentences, and moving them around prisons to make them more uncomfortable.

In December 2014, the Belarusian Parliament passed a new law which allows plea bargaining in criminal cases. If criminals admit their guilt and cooperate with the authorities, sentences can be commuted. In cases involving the death penalty, such sentences can be commuted to life in prison. This is potentially a positive step, if implemented.

There were at least forty preventative arrests in the month leading up to the Ice Hockey World Championships which took place in Minsk in May 2014. Despite hopes that the event would shine a spotlight on Belarus and help pressure the authorities into improving the human rights situation, it did the opposite. Activists were detained on supposed minor charges such as swearing in public. Detentions were short, of up to 25 days, but it highlighted the extreme political pressure some NGOs and human rights organisations face. Other vulnerable members of society, including the homeless, were also rounded up and detained for the duration of the championships.

Death Penalty

Belarus continues to use the death penalty. Three sentences were carried out in 2014 and one person remains on death row; he is appealing against the sentence. There has been no improvement in the method of carrying out the sentences: the authorities continue to provide no warning to next of kin and no release of the bodies to the families; some families are not even told where the bodies are buried. Executions are carried out even if a case has been sent before the UN Human Rights Committee. The last execution was carried out in October. The prisoner's mother received a package containing his personal effects prior to her being officially informed by letter that the sentence had been carried out. In previous cases, the authorities have not provided the personal effects to the next of kin after a death sentence has been carried out.

There are no indications that the government of Belarus is considering a moratorium on the death penalty. The UK, along with the EU, continues to call for this, leading eventually to abolition.

LGB&T Rights

The British Embassy in Minsk continues to support LGB&T people in Belarus, and flew a rainbow flag on the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia. LGB&T people suffered increased harassment from the regime during 2014. The authorities refused permission to hold a parade in Minsk in March, and put pressure on landlords so as to make it impossible to find venues to host any LGB&T events.

This publication is part of the [2014 Human Rights and Democracy Report](#).