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Belarus

Following pro-democracy uprisings in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, the authorities in Belarus focused on preempting similar events during that country's 2006 presidential election. President Alexander Lukashenka tightened his grip on power and maintained an assault on the media, opposition, and human rights groups.

Political Freedoms

After a flawed October 2004 referendum allowed Lukashenka to run for a third term, both the authorities and the opposition began preparing for the March 2006 presidential election. The government continued to prosecute opposition activists, often on spurious grounds. In December 2004, Mikhail Marinich, a leading opposition politician, was sentenced to five years in prison for allegedly stealing computer equipment belonging to a nongovernmental organization (NGO), Dzelavaia Initsiiativa, which he headed. The prosecution was widely criticized as politically motivated, since neither the NGO itself nor the donor of the equipment, the United States Embassy, had complained of theft. Marinich suffered a stroke in prison in March 2005 that, according to relatives, resulted from a denial of treatment for high blood pressure. Later that month, a Minsk court reduced the sentence to three-and-a-half years; a general amnesty in August reduced this sentence by one more year.

On May 15, 2005, the authorities arrested Sergei Skrebets, a former supporter of Lukashenka who had joined the opposition, for bribing a state official. Skrebets denied the charges, maintaining that they were politically motivated, and he twice went on hunger strike, causing him to be hospitalized in September. His trial is scheduled for November.

Opposition activists continued to face jail terms and fines for organizing public protests and meetings. On February 24, 2005, a Minsk court fined Sergei Antonchik, a former Supreme Soviet deputy, the equivalent of U.S.\$1,600 for holding an unauthorized gathering at a private apartment. Antonchik had apparently been unable to secure premises for the congress of a humanitarian organization he founded. On May 31 a Minsk court sentenced Nikolai Statkevich and Pavel Severinets to three years' imprisonment—later reduced to two years under the August amnesty—for their role in organizing opposition demonstrations in October 2004. On June 10, opposition politician Andrei Klimov was sentenced to eighteen months' community service for his role in organizing a March 25 demonstration.

In April 2005, the Belarusian Supreme Court closed the Independent Institute of Social, Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), which was renowned for its objective surveys of public opinion. Observers

believed the closure was part of the authorities' attempts to control electoral information in the lead-up to the 2006 ballot.

In October 2005, the opposition organized a National Congress of Pro-Democratic Forces, at which some eight hundred delegates elected Alexander Milinkevich as their candidate for the 2006 presidential election. Previously uninvolved in politics, Milinkevich had held a variety of civil society positions, including as head of a Grodno-based NGO resource centre, Ratusha, which the authorities closed in 2003 for possessing a printing machine without a publishing license.

Media Freedom

The authorities also continued their assault on the independent media. In September 2005, they terminated the national distribution and printing contracts of the independent newspaper *Narodnaia Volia*, forcing it, along with other independent Belarusian newspapers, to print their editions in Smolensk, Russia. Earlier, the newspaper had struggled to pay more than U.S.\$50,000—a phenomenal sum for Belarus—in libel damages awarded to a politician in July. The denial of access to the state-owned national distribution network greatly reduced *Narodnaia Volia*'s circulation and viability as a business.

On March 24, 2005, police raided the home of Aleksei Karol, editor-in-chief of *Zhoda*, an independent newspaper, after the paper published several caricatures of Lukashenka. They confiscated materials related to the images and charged Karol and his colleague Zdvizhkov with offending the honor and dignity of the president. A court later found them guilty and ordered them to pay a fine of approximately U.S.\$1,500 each.

On October 18, 2005, Vasil Hrodnikau, a freelance journalist who wrote social and political articles for *Narodnaia Volia* for seven years, was murdered at his home. Hrodnikau's death followed the murder a year earlier of Veronika Cherkasova, a journalist with the newspaper *Solidarnost*. Cherkasova had written articles on crime, religion, and a series entitled "The KGB is Still Watching You." At this writing, separate investigations into the two deaths were ongoing. It remained unclear whether the murders were related to the journalists' professional activities.

Interference with NGOs

The government continued to interfere with the work of nongovernmental organizations. In 2005 the authorities particularly targeted the Union of Poles in Belarus (SPB); with approximately ten thousand ethnic Poles (out of a total four hundred thousand in Belarus) estimated to be involved in SPB, it is the largest NGO in the country. It publishes a weekly newspaper, *Glos z nad Niemna*, and is reportedly funded by the Polish government. In March the authorities invalidated the results of the SPB's congress, which elected Andzhelika Borys as chair of the organization, maintaining that the previous chair, the allegedly pro-government Tadeusz Kruczkowski, was the organization's legitimate leader. The authorities also prevented the publication of *Glos z nad Niemna* and printed bogus editions that criticized Borys and her

supporters. Courts imposed fines on six of the newspaper's journalists who publicly protested these developments. The row escalated on July 27 when riot police raided the SPB building, evicted Borys and her supporters, and escorted Kruczkowski inside the building the following day.

Defending Human Rights

Authorities continued to target the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) and other human rights organizations. In November 2004 prosecutors opened a criminal investigation against BHC lawyer Garry Pogonyailo for allegedly libeling Lukashenka and other senior government officials in an interview with Swedish television. Pogonyailo had accused them of involvement in the "disappearance" of opposition figures. The case was dropped several months later. The BHC was forced to shut down its regional network of offices in January 2005 after the Ministry of Justice alleged violations of the organization's internal membership rules and failure properly to register a regional office.

The Fate of the "Disappeared"

The fate and whereabouts of the four public figures who "disappeared" in Belarus in 1999 and 2000—Viktor Gonchar, Yury Zakharenko, Anatoly Krasovskii, and Dmitry Zavadskii—continued to remain unclear in 2005. The authorities were hostile toward relatives of the four men who sought answers to their fate. On July 7 a riot police officer punched Svetlana Zavadskaia, Dmitry Zavadskii's wife, in the face when the authorities broke up an otherwise peaceful rally marking the fifth anniversary of his "disappearance." Zavadskaia was hospitalized with a concussion. Official investigations continued to fail to address strong suspicions of state involvement in the men's "disappearance" and their likely extrajudicial execution.

Key International Actors

The European Union and the U.S. continued to sharply criticize the Belarusian authorities for their authoritarian rule and maintained a travel ban on top officials imposed in September 2004. On September 29, 2005, the European Parliament strongly condemned "indiscriminate attacks" on opponents of the Lukashenka administration, including against the Union of Poles in Belarus, as well as the government's refusal to permit members of the parliament to conduct a fact-finding mission in Belarus in August.

The E.U. and U.S. continued to provide financial support for Belarus' fledgling civil society. In September the E.U. announced a €2 million project to broadcast independent television and radio programs from the E.U. to Belarus. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) strategic plan for 2003-2005 focused on assisting the independent media, NGOs, and pro-democracy organizations. In April, USAID launched a two-year U.S.\$1 million project to counter human trafficking.

Diplomatic rows erupted in Belarus' bilateral relations with the Czech Republic and Poland. After the Polish government criticized Belarus' interference with the Union of Poles in Belarus, the Belarusian authorities accused the Polish government of interfering in its internal affairs and expelled a diplomat.

Poland reciprocated the following day and later recalled its ambassador from Minsk. On January 21, 2005, Belarus expelled Czech diplomat Pavel Krivohlavy amid allegations of sexual liaisons with young boys. State television broadcast footage of Krivohlavy kissing young men in a café, but the footage was accompanied by heavy criticism of the Czech government's support of Belarusian pro-democracy NGOs and the opposition, raising suspicions that the expulsion was politically motivated. The Czech government expelled a Belarusian diplomat in response.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) presence in Minsk continued to play an active role in monitoring Belarus' adherence to OSCE principles. It issued critical statements in response to attacks on opposition figures and the independent media. In April 2005, the OSCE issued a statement expressing regret at the closure of the IISEPS.

The Lukashenka administration continued to refuse the United Nations special rapporteur on Belarus, Adrian Severin, access to the country. Instead, Severin traveled to Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania to meet with organizations and parliamentarians about Belarus' human rights record. In April the U.N. Commission on Human Rights again adopted a resolution that was strongly critical of the Belarus government's human rights record and extended the special rapporteur's mandate for another year. Among other things, the resolution expressed "deep concern" at the implication of senior officials in the 1999-2000 "enforced disappearance and/or summary execution" of four public figures (see above) and about "persistent reports of harassment and closure" of NGOs, independent media, and the political opposition.