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Belarus

The Belarusian authorities' repressive grip on political and media freedom intensified after the March 2006 presidential election, which was considered by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC), the US, and the EU to have failed to meet international standards for free and fair elections. Opposition leaders and activists remain behind bars, and the authorities continue to beat, detain, and intimidate civil society groups, making it difficult for them to function.

Political Freedoms

Political opposition groups are not illegal in Belarus, but authorities make it almost impossible for them to operate. Registration is obligatory but frequently denied for arbitrary and unfounded reasons. In 2007 dozens of opposition activists were beaten and arrested for a variety of trumped-up misdemeanors and criminal offenses. For example, Alexander Kazulin, a former presidential hopeful in the March 2006 election who was arrested during a peaceful post-election opposition march, is serving a five-and-a-half-year prison term for hooliganism and disturbing public order. When opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich organized a European March in October to show Belarus' commitment to become closer to Europe, more than 50 opposition activists were detained in advance. Among them was the leader of the United Civic Party in the Homiel region, who was sentenced to seven days in jail allegedly for using obscene language in public.

In spring and summer 2007, more than 60 activists were beaten, fined, and jailed for participating in and preparing for Freedom Day, the anniversary of the declaration of Belarus' sovereignty, an annual Chernobyl rally, and the European March. A few members of the youth opposition group Young Front were charged with acting on behalf of an unregistered group, and several more were detained for showing their

support for their fellow activists. Punishments ranged from large fines to two years in jail; at the time of writing Young Front leaders Zmicier Dashkievich and Artur Finkievich are still serving jail sentences. Young Front's registration application has been denied several times; in May 2007, registration was refused for supposed contradictions in the organization's charter. At least five activists were detained across Belarus in July for alleged petty hooliganism. Riot police beat the leader of the youth wing of the United Civil Party Young Democrats, breaking his arm.

The government of President Lukashenka shut down Belarus' only private university. Recently, students have been sometimes expelled from universities in retaliation for involvement in groups associated with the opposition. For example, three students were expelled from Belarusian State Pedagogical University in late 2006 for their political activities.

Yuri Aleynik, of the Movement for Liberty and member of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, a civil society group affiliated with Reporters Without Borders, was expelled from the Presidential Management Academy in July 2007, for allegedly missing too many classes despite his excellent grades; more likely, he was expelled for his association with civil society groups.

Human Rights Defenders and Civil Society

Only five human rights organizations remain registered in Belarus: the Belarusian Association of Journalists, Society for the Belarusian Language, Belarusian PEN Center, Belarusian Helsinki Committee, and Pravavaia Initsiativa (Legal Initiative). The authorities continually seek to intimidate and control these groups, including by penalizing them for association with unregistered organizations. Other human rights groups continue to operate without registration; their attempts to register legally are repeatedly denied.

For example, on September 21, 2007 the human rights group Viasna filed suit with the Belarusian Supreme Court, challenging the Ministry of Justice's refusal to register the organization. The ministry claimed that Viasna did not meet registration requirements of the Nongovernmental Organizations Law and had used in its application incorrect information on birthdates and the spelling of names. It also

noted that 20 of the organization's 69 founders have been convicted for various misdemeanor offences. In July 2007, the United Nations Human Rights Committee found that the closure of the organization's predecessor (of the same name) was a violation of Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

The Supreme Economic Court upheld a ruling by the Economic Court of Minsk ordering the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) to pay 160m rubles (about US\$75,000) and confiscating property valued at 255,000 rubles (about US\$120) in fees and back taxes for tax-exempt grants received from the EU's TACIS program (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States).

Religious Freedom

The Belarusian constitution provides for freedom of religion, but the government makes it difficult for religious institutions other than those affiliated with the Belarusian Orthodox Church to practice. The authorities often refuse to register spaces where religious organizations convene, choosing a strict interpretation of the housing code, therefore making such gatherings illegal, and have fined, threatened, and detained several religious leaders for holding religious services in "unauthorized" spaces. More than 25 foreign Catholic and Protestant clergy were expelled from Belarus between the summers of 2006 and 2007 for allegedly "posing a threat to national security."

Media Freedom

The government continues to tightly control the media. There are no independent television or radio stations. The authorities monitor the Internet, and politically sensitive sites are often temporarily shut down. Several privately-owned newspapers are printed in Russia because local, state-run printing companies are not permitted to print material that "discredits Belarus" by "fraudulent representation" of developments in the country. Before the 2006 presidential election the state postal service Belpochta stopped distributing several opposition newspapers.

In September 2007, 14,000 copies of the opposition newspaper *Tovarishch* were confiscated for being printed in Belarus.

All Internet access passes through the state-owned operator Beltelcom, and the State Center for Information Security, supervised by President Lukashenka, is responsible for protecting state secrets and for running the country's top domain (.by). Following President Lukashenka's assertion that there is "anarchy on the Internet," Deputy Information Minister Alexander Slabadchuk announced that the government would create an inter-agency working group to create policies for controlling the Internet. The parliament is working on a law that will make registration of all Internet news sites obligatory.

The September 2007 conviction of opposition politician Andrei Klimov on charges of calling to overturn the constitutional order of Belarus with the use of mass media sent an unambiguous signal that the Internet was not a safe alternative to the print media for expressing criticism of the government. Klimov was sentenced to two years in jail following a closed trial.

Journalists from Reuters and Agence France Presse were detained in September 2007 without explanation. They were covering the trial of a member of the youth opposition movement; later an official of the Brest Interior Department explained that they participated in an "unauthorized street act." Leading up to the October 14 European March, Igor Bancar, a journalist from *Magazyn Polski Na Uchodztwie* (Polish Magazine on Emigration), was arrested and held for 10 days for "hooliganism."

Key International Actors

Multilateral organizations as well as the EU and the US remained deeply critical of Belarus' human rights record, while Belarusian authorities persisted in their refusal to heed key actors' recommendations to improve the situation or respond to penalties for failing to do so.

In June 2007, the EU suspended Belarus' trade benefits under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) after Belarus failed to implement recommendations

made by the International Labor Organization to improve the treatment of independent unions. The United States had already suspended GSP in 2000 for failure to take steps to allow the right of association and collective bargaining.

United States Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, David Kramer, made an official visit to Belarus in April 2007. Kramer told the press that if Belarus wishes to improve relations with US, it must release all political prisoners and stop persecution of political activists.

In August 2007, the United States expanded the list of Belarusian governmental officials banned from the United States. The original visa ban list was created in May 2006, and included almost 40 names cited for violating human rights and committing fraud during presidential elections.

In December 2006 the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 61/175 sharply criticizing Belarus for the failure to “hold free and fair elections, arbitrary use of State power against opposition candidates, routine harassment and detention of political and civil society activists,” harassment and detention of journalists, implication of government officials in the enforced disappearance or summary execution of opposition politicians and a journalist, forced closure of the European Humanities University in Minsk, harassment and closure of civil society organizations, and harassment and prosecution of human rights defenders. It also cited Belarus for failing to cooperate with the Human Rights Council.

In May the United Nations General Assembly rejected Belarus’ bid for a seat on the HRC. A broad coalition of international and national nongovernmental organizations, including Human Rights Watch, raised strong objections about Belarus’ candidacy, pointing to its poor human rights record and lack of cooperation with the HRC.