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Annual Review

of the Human Rights Situation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex
People in Belarus covering the period of January to December 2018

Belarus

Asylum

A trans asylum seeker was refused asylum in Belarus in July, after having faced persecution in Uzbekistan. She was detained by the Uzbek police four times between 2014 and 2017 and beaten for refusing to out other LGBT people. In 2017, after being raped in detention, she fled the country.

Bias-motivated violence

The lack of registration and effective investigation of hate crimes against LGBT people remains a severe issue in the country. LGBT are often met with homophobia and transphobia by police officers, which further perpetuates their victimisation. It also results in low reporting.

Freedom of assembly

In April, the DOTYK queer cultural festival was cancelled in two different venues, after the authorities found safety risks last minute. The events were held in a secret location in the end. The action of the authorities was welcome by some as concern for the safety of LGBT people, but seen by many others as restricting their freedom of assembly.

Freedom of expression

On 17 May, the UK Embassy in Minsk flew a rainbow flag outside its building on the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Intersexism & Transphobia. This was not the first time the Embassy raised the flag on IDAHOBIT, but in previous years, the government just ignored the action. On 20 May, the Ministry of Interior released a statement saying that the UK was challenging Belarusian “traditional values”; and calling LGBT people and same-sex relationships “fake”.

On 21 May, an online petition (“For police for all people”) was launched, asking the government to review the legality of the Ministry’s statement. The petition was signed by 1,800 people. On the same day, the Minister of Interior, Ihar Shunevich, called the UK Embassy’s action propaganda of an “unacceptable” way of life. The next day, social media users began to publish protest posts tagged #янеподделка (#iamnotfake), condemning the Ministry’s earlier statement. Throughout the summer, allies of the Belarusian LGBTQ+ community carried Shunevich’s portrait at Pride marches in the US, Canada and the UK, to mock his statements.

On 24 May, activist Viktoria Biran posed for a photo outside the Interior Ministry holding a poster with the slogan “YOU are fake!” Two months later, the court of the Central District of Minsk found Biran guilty of violating the “procedure for the organisation and holding of mass events” (Article 23.34 of the Code of Administrative Offenses of Belarus) and sentenced her to a fine of 367.5 Belarusian roubles (160EUR). Video footage shows that Biran and her friend spent three seconds taking the photo in front of the Ministry.

“Today’s court ruling is simply absurd. Viktoria was ‘protesting’ for three seconds and she was alone except for a friend who took the photos. It is just not conceivable that this can be taken seriously as a mass protest offence. [...] This decision is as unjust as it is wrong and must be quashed as it directly violates the right to freedom of expression”

Marie Struthers - Amnesty International’s Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Sadly, on 30 May the head of the BPF Youth (the youth wing of the opposition Belarusian People’s Front) also criticised the UK Embassy’s move as “imposing of the LGBT agenda” and condemned using LGBT symbols in public spaces.

Olga Romashko, Nadezhda Krapivina and Dmitry Efremov, students of the Fortinbras theater laboratory at the Belarus Free Theatre, installed an LGBT-themed flower bed on 28 June in front of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Along with freelance correspondent of BelaPAN, Andrei Shavlugo, the students were detained. They were later fined for disobeying the police.

On 28 November, three members of Belarus Free Theatre’s Studio Fortinbras were arrested and fined for “holding an unauthorised mass event”, when they put on a small public performance dressed up as police officers wearing rainbow ornaments. The performance in Minsk, aimed to draw attention to homophobia in Belarus.

Police and law enforcement

On 21 July, a police raid took place at the LGBT club Burlesque, in Minsk. The police checked the IDs of those present and asked about their employers. The venue was also raided on 29 June. LGBT activists suggested that the police raids were a response to the flower bed installation at the end of June.