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Head of state: **Alyaksandr Lukashenka**

Head of government: **Mikhail Myasnikovich**

Prisoners of conscience remained in detention; some were sentenced to increased prison terms for violating prison rules. Civil society activists, including human rights defenders and journalists, faced violations of their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association. Three men were executed.

Background

On 5 July, the UN Human Rights Council voted to appoint a Special Rapporteur on Belarus, following the adoption of a report by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights which documented a serious decline in the respect for human rights since December 2010.

Parliamentary elections on 23 September failed to return any opposition candidates. The OSCE election observation mission found violations of the rights to freedom of expression and association and concluded that the elections were not free or fair. On 27 August the Central Election Committee decreed that any candidates who called for an election boycott should be denied airtime, effectively depriving two opposition parties of any media coverage.

Prisoners of conscience

Six people remained in prison in connection with their participation in a demonstration on 19 December 2010, at least four of whom – Mykalaj Statkevich, Pavel Sevyarynets, Zmitser Dashkevich and Eduard Lobau – were prisoners of conscience.

- On 24 January, Minsk City Court refused Ales Bialiatski's appeal against his four-and-a-half-year sentence for "concealment of income on a large scale", and in September the sentence was upheld by the Supreme Court. Ales Bialiatski, chairperson of Human Rights Centre Viasna, and Vice-President of the International Federation for Human Rights, was sentenced on 24 November 2011. The conviction was related to the use of personal bank accounts in Lithuania and Poland to support the work of Human Rights Centre Viasna in Belarus.
- On 14 April, former opposition presidential candidate Andrei Sannikau was released following a presidential pardon. He was reportedly pressured into signing a request for a pardon, and was told that his criminal record would remain for eight years. He had served 16 months of his five-year sentence. Zmitser Bandarenka, a member of Andrei Sannikau's campaign team, was released on 15 April.
- On 28 August, a court sitting in a closed session in Hlybokaye (Glubokoe) prison colony sentenced Zmitser Dashkevich to a further year in prison for allegedly violating prison rules. Zmitser Dashkevich had been repeatedly punished for various minor violations of prison rules; the prison authorities reportedly placed him in the punishment cell on some occasions to protect him from physical attacks by fellow prisoners.

Freedom of expression

The authorities continued to use the crimes of "libelling the President" and "insulting the President" against journalists to discourage legitimate criticism of government authorities.

- On 21 June, Andrzej Poczobut, correspondent for the Polish daily newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza and a prominent Polish-Belarusian minority activist, was arrested in his apartment in Hrodna and charged with "libelling the President" for articles published in Belarusian independent media. He was released on bail on 30 June. Andrzej Poczobut was already serving a three-year suspended prison sentence on the same charge for other newspaper articles. If found guilty under the new charge, he would serve both sentences consecutively and could face imprisonment for over seven years. At the end of the year the investigation was ongoing.

Human rights defenders

Human rights defenders were subjected to various forms of harassment, including travel bans and prosecution for administrative offences such as swearing in public. Valiantsin Stefanovich, deputy chair of the Human Rights Centre Viasna, was turned back at the Lithuanian border on 11 March, allegedly in connection with his failure to appear for military reserve duties. Oleg Volchek, a human rights lawyer, was informed in March that his name had been put on a list of those forbidden to leave the country.

- On 26 June, shortly after the NGO Platforma – which monitors prison conditions – called for a boycott of the 2014 hockey championships in Minsk, its chair Andrei Bondarenko was officially warned by the Minsk City Prosecutor that he could be prosecuted for "discrediting the Republic of Belarus and its state institutions". On 19 July, he was informed that he was on a list of people forbidden to leave the country because he was being investigated for tax evasion. The investigation against him was stopped and his name was removed from the list after he complained to the Ministry of Internal Affairs.
- On 26 November, the staff of Human Rights Centre Viasna were evicted from their office when it was confiscated as part of the sentence against the chair of the organization, Ales Bialiatzky.

During 2012, at least 15 human rights activists, journalists and opposition activists were prosecuted under the administrative code for swearing in public.

Freedom of association

The Law on Public Associations continued to set out restrictive rules for the registration and functioning of organizations. All NGOs still required authorization from the state in order to function and it remained a criminal offence under Article 193 (1) of the Criminal Code to act in the name of an unregistered organization.

- In January, the LGBTI organization Human Rights Project Gay Belarus was informed that its application for registration had been refused on the grounds that the names of two of the 61 founders were misspelled and that their dates of birth were incorrect.
- On 9 October, Minsk Economic Court ruled that the prison-monitoring NGO Platforma should be liquidated. The organization was accused by Sovetskiy district tax authorities in Minsk of failing to present a declaration of income on time, or to inform the tax authorities of a change of address. Its chair, Andrei Bondarenko, insisted that he had presented the income declaration on time and the organization had not changed its legal address.

Freedom of assembly

The Law on Mass Events continued to impose unreasonable limits on assemblies. It required organizers of any pre-planned public gathering to report "financial sources" used and they were only allowed to publicize events after official permission was

granted, which might not be until five days beforehand. Applications to hold public events were routinely denied for technical reasons.

- Alexander Denisenko, a member of the independent trade union REP, was refused permission by the local authorities in Brest to hold a public event on 17 March to protest against the cost of housing. Refusal was made on the grounds that he did not have contracts with the police, the ambulance service and the local authorities regarding cleaning and hygiene facilities. Alexander Denisenko appealed against the decision of the local authorities to the court of first instance, the appeal court, the district court and the Supreme Court, all of which supported the decision of the local authorities.

Death penalty

Belarus continued to carry out executions in conditions of utmost secrecy. Neither the prisoners condemned to death, nor their relatives, are informed of the execution before it is carried out. The body is not returned to relatives and they are not informed of the burial site. They can be left waiting weeks or even months before they receive the official death notice.

- Uladzslau Kavalyou and Dzmitry Kanavalau were executed in March in connection with a series of bomb attacks, most recently in a metro station in the capital Minsk on 11 April 2011. There were serious concerns over the fairness of the trial. As in the cases of Vasily Yuzepchuk and Andrei Zhuk (executed in March 2010), and Andrei Burdyko (executed in July 2011), the authorities ignored a request made by the UN Human Rights Committee not to execute Uladzslau Kavalyou and Dzmitry Kanavalau until it had considered their cases.

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