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proceedings of the Tribunal were marked with severe irregularities and violations of the right to a fair trial. Challenges to the jurisdiction of the court continued to be barred due to a constitutional provision. Statements from prosecution witnesses shown by the defence to have been false were still used as evidence in court. Affidavits by defence witnesses that the accused was too far from the site of the offence to be involved were not admitted. The government prevented defence witnesses abroad from attending trials by denying visas. Appeals processes were marked by similar flaws.

Despite repeated calls by Amnesty International and other human rights organizations to stop executions after unfair trials and flawed appeal hearings, three prisoners were executed in 2015, bringing the number of executions after ICT trials to four.

BELARUS

Republic of Belarus

Head of state: **Alyaksandr Lukashenka**

Head of government: **Andrey Kabyakou**

Legislation severely restricting freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly remained in place. Journalists continued to face harassment. Several prisoners convicted in politically motivated trials in previous years were released but compelled to regularly report their movements and activities to police. At least two people were sentenced to death, but no executions were reported. Harassment and persecution of human rights defenders continued, as did discrimination, harassment and violence against members of sexual minorities.

BACKGROUND

In October, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka comfortably won his fifth consecutive term in office, against a backdrop of state-controlled media as well as harassment and reprisals against political opponents.

Internationally mediated talks on the conflict in eastern Ukraine, hosted in the capital, Minsk, aided Belarus' diplomatic efforts to improve relations with the EU. In October, the EU suspended its longstanding sanctions against senior Belarusian officials, with the exception of four security officers believed to be linked to enforced disappearances of political activists in earlier years.

The national currency lost over 50% of its value against the US dollar, and the economy was projected to contract by around 4%, largely due to the economic downturn in Russia, its principal trading partner.

DEATH PENALTY

Belarus retained the death penalty. No executions were reported, but on 18 March Syarhei Ivanou was sentenced to death. The Supreme Court rejected his appeal on 14 July. On 20 November, the Hrodna Regional Court handed down a death sentence to Ivan Kulesh.¹

On 1 April, the UN Human Rights Committee adopted the view that the execution of Aleh Hryshkautsou in 2011 constituted a violation of his right to life; that he had not received a fair trial; and that his confession had been obtained under duress.

PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE

In August, prisoners of conscience Mikalai Statkevich and Yury Rubtsou were released by a presidential order, along with other activists, Mikalai Dzyadok, Ihar Alinevich, Yauhen Vaskovich and Artsyom Prakapenka, who had been imprisoned following politically motivated trials. However, their convictions were not quashed and they were placed under considerable restrictions, including "prophylactic supervision". Former presidential candidate Mikalai Statkevich therefore was prevented from standing in forthcoming elections, and was ordered to regularly report his movements and activities to the police for the following eight years. Failure to comply could lead to heavier restrictions and new criminal charges. Similar

restrictions, for shorter periods of time, were imposed on the other five released activists.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The media remained under tight government control, and independent media outlets and journalists routinely faced harassment.

Freelance journalists who contributed to foreign media were required to obtain accreditation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was regularly refused or indefinitely delayed. Kastus Zhukouski, who worked for Poland-based Belsat TV, was fined three times for working without accreditation, most recently on 9 July, and three more times in previous years, by the Central District Court and the Zheleznodorozhnyi District Court in Homel, as well as the Rahachou District Court. According to independent media watchdog Index on Censorship, since January at least 28 freelance journalists were issued fines of between 3 and 7.8 million roubles (US\$215-538) for working without accreditation.

Under the vaguely worded amendments to the Law on Mass Media passed in December 2014, the Ministry of Information was given the power to compel internet providers to block access to specific online resources, without a court order. On 27 March, access to the websites of human rights organization Vyasna and of independent news platforms Belarusian Partisan and Charter '97 was blocked under this provision.

Between 2 and 5 October, the websites of news agencies BelaPAN and Naviny.by became inaccessible following a hacker's attack, after they published reports of students being forced to take part in a public prayer service attended by the President.

On 11 August, activists Vyachaslau Kasinerau, Yaraslau Uliyanenkau, Maksim Pyakarski and Vadzim Zharomski, and one unnamed Russian national, were detained in Minsk for putting up graffiti "Belarus must be Belarusian" and "Revolution of consciousness". They were released on 31 August after agreeing not to disclose details of the investigation. Because of the political

nature of these phrases, they were charged with the crime of "malicious hooliganism" and may face up to six years in prison if convicted. Vyachaslau Kasinerau sustained a broken jaw during the detention by police and was hospitalized. Their trial was still pending at the end of the year.

FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

The Law on Mass Events, under which any assembly or public protest is regarded as unlawful unless expressly permitted by the authorities, continued to be regularly applied.

On 27 September, a street assembly in the town of Baranavichy, which had been organized in support of presidential candidate Tatsyana Karatkevich and sanctioned by the authorities, was joined by some 30 football fans on their way to a football match. Shortly after they started chanting "Long live Belarus!", police arrived at the scene and took them away in vans. The remaining protesters were allowed to carry on.

On 30 September, a court in Minsk issued fines of between 5.4 and 9 million roubles (US\$300-500) to Mikalai Statkevich and Uladzimir Nyaklyaeu, both of them presidential candidates in 2010, and leader of the United Civic Party Anato Lyabedzka, for organizing an "unsanctioned" protest in connection with the forthcoming election. Other peaceful protesters were similarly arrested and fined during the year.

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Article 193.1 of the Criminal Code, which prohibits activities by unregistered organizations (political parties and religious groups, as well as NGOs), remained in place.

Elena Tonkacheva, a prominent human rights defender and Chair of the Board of the Center for Legal Transformation, was ordered to leave Belarus and barred from re-entering the country for three years. A Russian national, she had been a resident of Belarus since 1985. The order was issued on 5 November 2014 and referred to repeated traffic offences; Elena Tonkacheva repeatedly

tried to appeal it, without success. Minsk City Court dismissed her final appeal on 19 February, forcing her to leave by 21 February.

Leanid Sudalenka, head of human rights NGO Homel Centre for Strategic Litigation, received at least two death threats via email in March, which the authorities refused to investigate. On 8 April, police searched his home and office, and on 14 April a criminal case was opened against Leanid Sudalenka himself. The authorities accused him of distributing pornography from his email account, but he claimed it had been hacked. Leanid Sudalenka believed these were reprisals for his work in helping victims of human rights violations take complaints to the UN Human Rights Committee. The latest complaint was submitted on 28 February by Olga Haryunou, whose son had been secretly executed on 22 October 2014 and who demanded to know the location of his grave.

RIGHTS OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND INTERSEX PEOPLE

Members of sexual minorities continued to face routine discrimination, harassment and violence.

Mikhail Pischevsky, who had been beaten by anti-LGBT activists as he was leaving a gay party at a club in Minsk on 25 May 2014, died on 27 October of complications caused by his severe head injuries. Only one of his attackers was convicted and sentenced to two years and eight months' imprisonment for hooliganism and negligence, and released under presidential pardon in August, having served 11 months of his sentence.

1. Second known death sentence in Belarus in 2015: Ivan Kulesh (EUR 49/2926/2015)

BELGIUM

Kingdom of Belgium

Head of state: **King Philippe**

Head of federal government: **Charles Michel**

The government introduced several proposals to combat terrorism that raised human rights concerns. The number of asylum-seekers spiked in the second half of the year. Their asylum claims could not be registered promptly by authorities and as a result hundreds of people remained without shelter.

COUNTER-TERROR AND SECURITY

The parliament adopted new measures to counteract terrorism, in particular the criminalization of travelling into or out of Belgium with the purpose of perpetrating a terrorism-related offence, the expansion of the grounds for stripping a person of Belgian nationality or refugee status if convicted for offences related to terrorism, and new measures to combat violent "extremism". As with previously adopted measures to counteract terrorism, the authorities did not carry out an evaluation of the compliance of the new measures with human rights standards.

In November, in the aftermath of the attacks in Paris, France, the Prime Minister proposed further measures.

In December, the Council of Ministers approved proposals concerning some of the announced measures. They included the extension of pre-charge detention from 24 to 72 hours and the power to carry out searches at any time in investigations of terrorism-related offences. They also included the establishment of a database of Belgian nationals or residents who have attempted to travel or have travelled abroad to fight in armed conflicts or with armed groups labelled as terrorist organizations by the government.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

In June, the European Court of Human Rights