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Republic of Belarus

Head of state: Alyaksandr Lukashenka

Head of government: Mikhail Myasnikov

Belarus remained the only country in Europe to carry out executions. Opposition politicians and human rights activists were detained for legitimate activities. The right to freedom of expression was severely restricted and journalists faced harassment. Severe restrictions on freedom of assembly remained in place. NGOs continued to be arbitrarily denied registration.

Death penalty

Following 24 months in which there were no executions, at least three men were executed in secrecy. Pavel Selyun and Ryhor Yuzepchuk, both sentenced to death in 2013, were executed in April and Alyaksandr Haryunou was executed in November. Judicial appeals and appeals sent to the President asking for clemency were rejected. In all cases, the UN Human Rights Committee requested that the sentences not be carried out until it had considered the respective communications; the Belarusian authorities proceeded with the executions regardless, in violation of their obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). One other man, Eduard Lykau, was a death row prisoner at the end of the year.

In October, the UN Human Rights Committee ruled that the execution of Vasily Yuzepchuk in 2010 constituted a violation of his right to life under Article 6 of the ICCPR. It was the third such ruling by the Committee against Belarus. The Committee also found that he had been subjected to torture in order to extract a confession, that his right to a fair trial had been violated and that his trial had failed to meet the necessary criteria for independence and impartiality.

Freedom of expression – media

Freedom of expression was severely restricted. The media remained largely under state control and was used to smear political opponents. Independent media outlets were harassed, and bloggers, online activists and journalists were subjected to administrative and criminal prosecution. State-run distribution outlets refused to disseminate independent periodicals and internet activity remained closely monitored and controlled.

In April, the authorities started using Article 22.9 of the Administrative Code (“unlawful creation and dissemination of mass media produce”) to prosecute freelance journalists writing for media outlets based outside Belarus, claiming that they required formal accreditation as foreign journalists with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

On 25 September, Maryna Malchanava was fined 4,800,000 roubles (US\$450) by a court in Babruisk after an interview she had recorded locally was broadcast by Poland-based satellite TV channel, Belsat. At least three other Belarusian journalists were fined similar amounts under Article 22.9 and several others received police warnings or had administrative proceedings opened against them.

Freedom of assembly

The Law on Mass Events remained unchanged, effectively prohibiting street protests including by a single individual despite continuing calls from UN human rights mechanisms for Belarus to review its restrictive legislation on public assemblies and to decriminalize the organization of public events without official permission. Peaceful protesters were repeatedly arrested and sentenced to short periods of detention.

The annual rally to mark the anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster took place in April. According to civil society representatives, 16 participants were arbitrarily detained in connection with the event. They included Yury Rubtsou, an activist from Homel, who was detained for wearing a T-shirt with the slogan “Lukashenka, leave!” and accused of “failing to obey police orders” and “swearing”. He was sentenced to 25 days' administrative detention in a trial in which he appeared topless after police had confiscated his T-shirt. In August a criminal case was opened against him, purportedly for insulting the judge during his earlier court appearance, and in October he was sentenced in a closed court hearing to two years and six months' imprisonment in an open regime prison (reduced by a year under an amnesty law). His appeal was pending at the end of the year.

In October a local activist and newspaper distributor, Andrei Kasheuski, was sentenced to 15 days' administrative detention on charges which included holding an “unauthorized mass event” and wearing a T-shirt with the slogan “Freedom to Political Prisoners” with a list of names on the back.

Prisoners of conscience

In the lead-up to the Ice Hockey World Championship on 9-25 May, 16 civil society activists were arrested and sentenced to between five and 25 days' administrative detention. Eight were arbitrarily arrested during or immediately after they attended a peaceful march commemorating the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. They were charged with “petty hooliganism” and “disobeying police orders”. Eight others, all known for their political activism, were detained in the days before the march under similar charges. They included former prisoner of conscience Zmitser Dashkevich, who had ended a three-year prison term in August 2013. Arrested outside his home on 24 April, Dashkevich was sentenced to 25 days' administrative detention for “disobeying police orders” and “violating restrictions imposed on him following his release from prison”. His detention lasted almost the entire period of the championship.

Long-term prisoner of conscience and former presidential candidate Mikalai Statkevich was awaiting transfer to a penal colony, scheduled for January 2015, to complete his six-year sentence for participating in post-election demonstrations. Originally sentenced in 2011, he was transferred to a strict regime prison in January 2012.

Eduard Lobau, an activist and member of youth organization Malady Front, was released in December having completed a four-year sentence for alleged random attacks on pedestrians.

On 21 June, the Chair of the Belarusian Human Rights Centre “Vyasna” and Vice-President of the International Federation for Human Rights, Ales Bialiatski, was released under a prison amnesty. He had served almost three years of a four-and-a-half-year sentence on charges of tax evasion.

Freedom of association

The authorities continued to restrict arbitrarily the right to freedom of association.

Article 193.1 of the Criminal Code, which criminalizes activities by unregistered organizations, continued to be used to obstruct the legitimate activities of civil society organizations in Belarus.

In February, Minsk Central District Court rejected the complaint by Valyantsin Stefanovich, Deputy Chairman of the NGO Human Rights Centre “Vyasna”, against the blocking of the NGO’s website, with no right of appeal. The NGO’s registration applications had been repeatedly rejected. In 2011 the Prosecutor General’s Office restricted access to the website under Article 193.1.

In November, the authorities nullified the residence permit of Russian citizen and human rights defender Elena Tonkacheva who was given one month to leave the country. Her appeal was pending at the end the year. The permit was due to expire in 2017. Elena Tonkacheva is head of the human rights organization Centre for Legal Transformation and has been living in Belarus for 30 years. The authorities claimed that the decision was linked to her violating public traffic regulations by driving over the speed limit. It was widely believed that she had been targeted for her legitimate human rights activities.