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Belarus

The human rights situation in Belarus continued to deteriorate in 2006. A flawed presidential poll in March led to the re-election of President Alexander Lukashenka for a third term. The government continues to severely restrict the activities of the media, political opposition, and human rights groups.

March 19 Presidential Elections

Belarusian authorities prevented opposition parties from campaigning effectively in the run-up to the March 19 presidential elections. In its final report on the elections, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) concluded that the elections failed to meet the organization's standards for democratic elections, citing harassment of opposition candidates and campaign workers, heavily biased media coverage, lack of transparency in ballot counting, and other problems.

Belarusian authorities attempted to portray opposition supporters as enemies of the state. President Lukashenka made public statements that were widely seen as threatening, including a promise to "tear the heads off" protesters. In February, police arrested four members of the NGO "Partnership," which was preparing to monitor the elections. Official statements in the media suggested that the four were plotting to overthrow the government and carry out terrorist attacks. On August 4, in a closed trial, a judge sentenced the accused—Mikalai Astreika, Tsimafey Dranchuk, Enira Branzinskaia, and Alexander Shalaika—to prison terms ranging from six months to two years on charges of "organizing and running an unregistered organization that infringes the rights of citizens."

On March 2 police beat and briefly detained opposition presidential candidate Alexander Kazulin. Prosecutors subsequently opened criminal investigations against him for allegedly attempting to hold an unsanctioned press conference and smashing a portrait of Lukashenka in the police station where he was held.

On March 9 courts in Minsk sentenced 10 supporters of opposition presidential candidate Alexander Milinkevich, including his deputy campaign head, to jail terms of 15 days each on charges stemming from a rally held the previous day. Other opposition supporters also faced charges related to public gatherings; the Belarusian human rights center Viasna estimates that police arrested 236 opposition campaign workers and supporters during the campaign period, some 90 percent of whom were sentenced to 15 days' detention.

On March 19 after authorities announced that Lukashenka had won over 80 percent of the vote, thousands of opposition supporters rallied in Minsk to protest the conduct of the elections and express support for Milinkevich. The protests lasted for five days, during which police carried out sporadic mass arrests of protesters; Viasna estimates that authorities detained more than 700 in total. Courts sentenced the overwhelming majority to short periods of detention.

Authorities continued to persecute political opponents after the elections. On July 13 a Minsk court sentenced Alexander Kazulin to five-and-a-half years in prison for his role in the protests. The EU and OSCE strongly condemned the decision. In September the courts rejected Kazulin's appeal. Milinkevich was jailed for 15 days after he participated in a rally on the anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster in April. On October 26 the European Parliament announced its decision to award Milinkevich the Sakharov Prize, the EU's most important human rights award.

Media Freedom

The authorities further stifled the media. Amendments to the criminal code enacted in January 2006 created penalties for "discrediting Belarus" by "fraudulent representation" of developments in the country.

The government continued to target one of Belarus's only independent newspapers, *Narodnaia Volia*. In addition to the authorities' terminating the paper's publishing and distribution contracts in Belarus in September 2005, that same month a court froze the paper's assets as part of an ongoing libel case brought by a politician.

In April 2006 Minsk city authorities wrote to local independent newspaper *Nasha Niva* indicating that the paper's presence in the city was no longer "appropriate," and refusing to confirm its legal address. The letter was related to the conviction of the paper's editor-in-chief, Andrey Dynko, who was sentenced to 10 days in jail for using foul language after he was arrested during a post-election protest. Earlier, authorities had removed the newspaper from the national subscription catalogue, cutting a key distribution channel.

On November 28, 2005, the Minsk prosecutor's office decided not to open a criminal investigation into the October killing of Vasil Hrodnikau, a freelance journalist who for seven years had published articles in *Narodnaia Volia* on society and politics. Hrodnikau's death followed the murder a year earlier of Veronika Cherkasova, a journalist with the newspaper *Solidarnost*. On December 28, 2005, Belarus' chief prosecutor announced that he was halting the probe into her death because of a lack of suspects.

Human Rights Defenders and Civil Society

Authorities continued to target the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC). In October 2005 the EU expressed concern at a decision by Belarusian prosecutors to reopen an investigation into charges that the BHC evaded taxes on grants it received through the EU's TACIS program (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States). On December 20 the Supreme Economic Court of Belarus reversed its original negative finding and levied heavy fines and back taxes against the organization. On May 24, 2006, the Belarusian Ministry of Justice asked the Supreme Court to order the BHC to suspend its activities. The EU expressed concern that this would eventually force the closure of Belarus's only remaining registered human rights NGO and urged that the charges be withdrawn.

On September 15 Dmitri (Zmister) Dashkevich, leader of the youth opposition group Young Front, was detained after answering a summons to present himself at the prosecutor general's office. He was charged with running an unregistered organization. On October 30 a Minsk court began hearing Dashkevich's case in closed session. Several hundred protesters gathered outside the courthouse to protest the trial.

The Fate of the “Disappeared”

The fate and whereabouts of the four public figures who “disappeared” in Belarus in 1999 and 2000—Viktor Gonchar, Yury Zakharenko, Anatoly Krasovskii, and Dmitry Zavadskii—continued to remain unclear. Belarusian authorities have yet to conduct a satisfactory inquiry into the incidents and have remained hostile to attempts by the victims’ relatives to elicit information. In September 2006 UN Special Rapporteur on Belarus Adrian Severin called on the UN Human Rights Council to back an international investigation into the “disappearances,” under the auspices of the UN high commissioner for human rights.

Key International Actors

Both the US and EU called for free and fair elections in Belarus. Following the announcement of Lukashenka’s re-election, they imposed visa bans on the president and 30 key officials. On May 18 the EU voted to extend its visa ban and freeze the assets of Lukashenka and some 35 Belarusian officials. The US Treasury Department enacted similar limitations on June 19.

The EU and US took measures to support civil society in Belarus ahead of the presidential elections. In late February, an EU-funded consortium of media organizations began broadcasting independent radio and television programs in Belarusian and Russian, aimed at providing an alternative to the state-controlled media. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) focused its efforts on supporting civil society and addressing key problem areas such as HIV/AIDS and human trafficking, budgeting over half of the US\$7 million country allocation for 2006 to address these issues.

Relations with Poland continued to be strained. In February the Belarusian KGB (state security service) accused the Polish embassy of hosting foreign spies plotting to disrupt the country ahead of the elections. The Polish government repeatedly expressed its support for pro-democracy forces in Belarus and hosted opposition candidate Milinkevich directly after the polls.

Belarusian authorities stopped a Czech embassy car transporting copies of a UN report on human rights problems in Belarus to the German embassy. Officers

threatened to charge the Belarusian driver with “subversive” activity. The incident followed a major diplomatic row in 2005, when Belarusian authorities expelled a Czech diplomat in what appeared to be retaliation for Czech support of pro-democracy activists in the country.

The Lukashenka administration continued to refuse access to the country for UN Special Rapporteur Adrian Severin. Severin instead assessed Belarus’s human rights situation from neighboring states. In the aftermath of the March elections, seven UN independent experts, including Severin, joined in expressing alarm at the “large number of violations of the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of association, fair trial, physical and mental integrity, and to liberty” in Belarus and in calling for independent and transparent investigations into all allegations of “serious human rights violations.” In September Severin delivered a strongly critical report to the UN Human Rights Council, expressing his “increased concern at the steady deterioration” of the human rights situation in the country and urging the government to “put an end to the ongoing human rights violations” and to “bring those responsible to justice.”

Belarusian authorities also barred the EU’s special representative on human rights, Michael Matthiessen, from visiting the country.