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BELARUS

REPUBLIC OF BELARUS

Head of state: Alyaksandr Lukashenka

Head of government: Sergei Sidorsky

Death penalty: retentionist

International Criminal Court: not signed

UN Women's Convention and its Optional Protocol: ratified

Overview - Covering events from January - December 2005

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The government continued to restrict freedom of expression and assembly. Opposition activists were arbitrarily detained and allegedly ill-treated by police. Some were given lengthy prison sentences for exercising their right to freedom of expression. Human rights defenders and civil society organizations were subjected to further restrictions and harassment. No progress was made in investigating four cases of "disappearance". Use of the death penalty continued.

Background

The government clampdown on civil society and freedom of expression remained of concern to the international community. In February the Representative on Freedom of the Media of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) visited Belarus. He criticized its restrictive media legislation, lack of an independent news media, and laws that criminalize libel and protect state officials from legitimate criticism. On 10 March the European Parliament adopted a resolution strongly condemning the harassment of opposition figures. The resolution called for efforts to overcome the isolation of Belarus through the creation of alternative news sources and the provision of scholarships in the European Union to Belarusian students.

Prisoners of conscience

Government critics were sentenced to prison terms or continued to serve long prison sentences for voicing their opposition to the government or its policies. Some prisoners had their sentences reduced under an amnesty declared by President Lukashenka on 5 May to commemorate the end of the Second World War.

- Mikhail Marinich, an opposition leader sentenced to five years' imprisonment on 20 December 2004, had his sentence reduced to three and a half years in February. He had been convicted on trumped-up charges of abusing an official position and theft. The court of appeal granted his appeal because of his past services to the state and his deteriorating health. He had a stroke on 7 March, but the authorities failed to inform his family or lawyer, who only learned of it when a fellow-inmate was released and told a newspaper. He was transferred to a prison hospital in Minsk on 15 March and returned to the prison colony on 18 May. In July he was hospitalized again with an eye infection. In August his sentence was reduced by a further year under the May amnesty measure.
- On 31 May Nikolai Statkevich, chair of Narodnaya Gramada, a social democratic party, and Pavel Severinets, head of the Popular Front youth movement, were sentenced to three years of corrective labour by Minsk Central District Court. They had been convicted of public order offences (under Article 342 of the Criminal Code) for organizing protests in Minsk. Opposition activists were protesting at electoral irregularities in parliamentary elections in October 2004 and in a referendum in which President Lukashenka won the right to lift the constitutional limit of two presidential terms. Their sentences were immediately reduced to two years under the terms of the May amnesty.
- On 10 June, Andrei Klimov, a former businessman and outspoken opposition politician, was sentenced to one and a half years of "restricted freedom" after being convicted of public order offences for organizing protests on 25 March. He started his sentence in September. Many protesters had been injured when riot police forcibly dispersed the March demonstration, which marked Freedom Day, the anniversary of the creation of the Belarusian People's Republic in 1918. On 28 March, 24 demonstrators were sentenced to jail terms of between three and 15 days for administrative offences.

Update

- On 5 August, Yuri Bandazhevsky was conditionally released under the May amnesty after serving four years of an eight-year sentence. Former rector of the Gomel State Medical Institute, he had been convicted in June 2001 of bribe-taking, although AI believes that the real reason for his

imprisonment was that he had criticized official responses to the Chernobyl nuclear reactor catastrophe of 1986. He remained subject to restrictive conditions, among them reporting regularly to the police and being barred from any managerial or political functions. In addition he was required to pay a fine of 35 million Belarusian roubles (US\$17,000), the amount he was alleged to have taken in bribes, before he was allowed to travel abroad.

Clampdown on freedom of expression

Opposition groups were harassed and threatened. Protests at the failure of investigations into the "disappearances" of four people, widely believed to have been killed by state agents, were among those that law enforcement officers suppressed with excessive force.

- The youth opposition movement Zubr recorded 417 incidents of harassment, including detention, of their members by the authorities between January and December. Three members were expelled from educational establishments for their political activities.
- In April police Special Forces (OMON) beat and detained peaceful demonstrators who had gathered on the 19th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear accident. A 14-year-old boy was allegedly pulled into a police van, so forcefully that ligaments in his hand were torn, and threatened for wearing a T-shirt bearing the slogan "Free Marinich".
- On 7 July police dispersed a demonstration to commemorate the anniversary of the "disappearance" of television camera operator Dmitry Zavadsky in 2000. His wife, Svetlana Zavadskaya, was reportedly punched in the face by riot police officers.
- On 16 September police attempted to disrupt a demonstration to observe the anniversary of the "disappearance" of opposition leaders Viktor Gonchar and Anatoly Krasovsky in 1999, and reportedly beat five Zubr protesters. One of them, Mikita Sasim, was treated in hospital for head injuries.

Human rights defenders

Human rights organizations, already severely hampered in their work by bureaucratic registration requirements and controversial guidelines, faced further obstructions. During the year parliament adopted a number of amendments to laws on public associations and political parties that further strengthened state control of non-governmental organizations. In July a presidential decree limited the financial support such groups could receive from Belarusian organizations and donors. In August international financial support for any activities that "aimed to change the constitutional order in Belarus, overthrow state power, interfere in internal affairs of the Republic of Belarus, or encourage the carrying out of such activities" was prohibited by amendment of a presidential decree of 22 October 2003.

- In April the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, the last remaining registered human rights organization, applied for a tax exemption for financial assistance from the International Helsinki Federation. In June it was informed that the request could not be granted because the funding was not in line with the presidential decree on the acceptance of foreign financial support.
- In July, Andrei Pochebut, Yusef Pozhetsky and Mecheslav Yaskevits, three prominent members of the Union of Poles of Belarus, were given prison sentences of between 10 and 15 days for protesting at government interference in the running of the Union. Police subsequently seized control of its headquarters. The three were convicted of "participating in an illegal protest" and "disobeying police orders". The government had refused to acknowledge the removal in elections of government supporters from its leadership.

Death penalty

No official statistics on the death penalty were published. According to the human rights group Viasna, at least one execution was carried out in 2005.

In July the deputy head of the presidential administration said that abolition of the death penalty could be considered "once social and economic preconditions were in place". Despite this statement from the government, there were no moves to end the use of the death penalty.

Belarus
Archive information

Europe and Central Asia: Summary of Amnesty International's concerns in the region, January-June 2005: Belarus
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