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Belarus: Peaceful intentions under fire -- Amnesty International demands freedom for four prisoners of conscience

Another four people in Belarus have been sentenced for the peaceful exercise of their human rights. Amnesty International considers them prisoners of conscience and calls for their immediate and unconditional release.

Mikalay Astreyka, Enira Branizkaya, Alyaksandr Shalayka and Tsimafey Dranchuk, all of them in their twenties, are members of an independent election monitoring group, Initiative Partnership. They were sentenced on 4 August to between six months and two years' imprisonment for their intention to observe the presidential elections in March 2006.

"These four young people have been sentenced for the legitimate exercise of their right to freedom of association," said Heather McGill, Amnesty International's researcher on Belarus.

Diplomatic representatives who observed the trial have condemned the sentences. The Chairman-In-Office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Karel De Gucht, expressed concern at the application of the criminal code in "a case linked to peaceful intentions to observe the presidential elections".

Amnesty International has repeatedly expressed concern about harassment, the intimidation of civil society activists, and the curtailment of the right to assembly and association. All civil society organizations face a difficult and expensive registration procedure and are often refused permission to register. Once they succeed in registering they face stringent controls and restrictions on their activities.

In December 2005, the Belarusian parliament passed a number of changes to the criminal code and the code of criminal procedure that enabled the authorities to further curtail the activities of civil society. In particular changes to Article 193 of the criminal code under which Mikalay Astreyka, Enira Branizkaya, Alyaksandr Shalayka, and Tsimafey Dranchuk have been sentenced makes it a criminal offence to act under the name of an unregistered organization.

Background

Mikalay Astreyka, Enira Branizkaya, Alyaksandr Shalayka, and Tsimafey Dranchuk were preparing to carry out independent monitoring of the presidential elections that were held on 19 March 2006 when they were arrested at their offices on 21 February 2006 by KGB officers. The KGB initially claimed that they

were organizing fraudulent exit polls and planning a violent uprising after the election. They were formally charged on 3 March under Article 193 Part 2 of the Criminal Code for 'organizing and running an unregistered organization that infringes the rights of citizens'. Initiative Partnership carried out independent monitoring of the parliamentary elections in 2004 and had attempted to register, but had been refused twice.

Mikalay Astreyka was sentenced to two years in prison, Tsimafey Dranchuk was given a one-year sentence and Alyaksandr Shalayka and Enira Branizkaya were sentenced to six months. Alyaksandr Shalayka and Enira Branizkaya will be released on 21 August because of the time they have already spent in detention. Tsimafey Dranchuk's wife gave birth to a son while her husband was in detention.

Public Document

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