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Alyaksandr Kazulin: Prisoner of Conscience

In a letter addressed to the Belarusian President, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, and copied to the General Procurator of Belarus, Amnesty International has today called for the immediate and unconditional release of Alyaksandr Kazulin, leader of the Belarusian Socialist Democratic Party, *Hramada*, former presidential candidate and former rector of the Belarusian State University. The organization believes that Alyaksandr Kazulin is a prisoner of conscience, and that his continuing imprisonment is a violation of his rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression.

In the letter, Amnesty International asserts that Alyaksandr Kazulin is being detained unlawfully, following a flagrantly unfair trial. The organization believes that the charges brought against Alyaksandr Kazulin, for which he is serving a five-and-a-half-year prison sentence, are a blatant pretext by the Belarusian authorities aimed at intimidating Alyaksandr Kazulin and obstructing his lawful political activities.

Furthermore, the organization is calling for the Belarusian government to conduct full and impartial investigations into reports of ill-treatment suffered by Alyaksandr Kazulin on various occasions at the hands of law enforcement officials, and to ensure his full redress/ for him.

The organization also urges the Belarusian government to respect the rights of its citizens to exercise their rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression, without fear of persecution or intimidation, in accordance with Belarus' obligations under international law, including under Article 19, 21 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Belarus is a state party.

Background:

Alyaksandr Kazulin was charged, under the provisions of the Belarusian Criminal Code, with "hooliganism", article 339, part 2, and, with "the organization of group activities that breach public order or active participation in similar activities", article 342, part 1. The prosecutor called for Alyaksandr Kazulin to be sentenced to a total of six years' imprisonment, three years on each charge. On 13 July 2006, a Minsk district court sentenced him to five and a half years.

Amnesty International monitored the Belarusian authorities' treatment of Alyaksandr Kazulin, members of his electoral campaign team, his family and his lawyer during the period of the March presidential elections. On various occasions, activists from his electoral headquarters were detained and beaten and had equipment seized by the security forces. Alyaksandr Kazulin's lawyer, Ihor Rynkevich, was also charged with "petty hooliganism" on 2 March. He was subsequently acquitted due to lack of evidence. At the end of March, Alyaksandr Kazulin's brother, Uladzimir Kazulin, was arrested and sentenced to five days' detention. He was charged with insubordination to police demands while trying to investigate his brother's arrest on 2 March.

Amnesty International believes that the continuing harassment and detention of opposition figures, and those involved in civil society activity generally, is a deliberate attempt by the authorities to intimidate and deter people from exercising their rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression. The result is the continued stifling of open, public debate and civil society activity within Belarus.

Amnesty International's worldwide membership will be campaigning on behalf of Alyaksandr Kazulin, as a prisoner of conscience, in the New Year.