

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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Belarus: Imprisoned for publishing a poem

Amnesty International condemns the conviction on 7 September of two opposition activists for publicly insulting President Lukashenka in a satirical leaflet.

Valery Levonevsky, the president of the national strike committee of market traders, and the deputy president Alexander Vasiliev were sentenced to two years in prison on 7 September by the Leninsky district court in Grodno for publicly insulting the president. The judge decreed that a leaflet which they had distributed prior to demonstrations on 1 May 2004 contained a public insult to the President. It called on people to take part in 1 May demonstrations "to come and say that you are against 'somebody' going on holiday skiing in Austria and having a good time at your cost". Alyaksandr Lukashenka is known to have spent his holidays in Austria. The other side of the leaflet contained an anonymous satirical poem about the cost of living in Belarus entitled "The Utilities Bill or 'the good life'". In addition Alexander Vasiliev was convicted of disturbing public order by organizing demonstrations on 1 May in Grodno. The judge also decreed that computers and other equipment that had earlier been taken from Valery Levonevsky and Alexandr Vasiliev would be confiscated "for the good of the state" and both men were ordered to pay fines of 643,278 Belarusian roubles (\$300) each.

Valery Levonevsky was first arrested on 1 May 2004 in Grodno and on 3 May he was sentenced to 15 days' detention for distributing leaflets calling for an unauthorized May Day rally. His son Vladimir was sentenced to 13 days for the same offence. Valery Levonevsky's detention was extended on 18 May and he was formally charged on 19 May with publicly insulting the president. Previously on 29 April his three children, Dmitry, Vladimir and Ekaterina, had been briefly detained for distributing leaflets at a market in Grodno.

The two men are now held in Grodno remand centre. They have 10 days in which to appeal their sentence.

Amnesty International considers the two men to be prisoners of conscience and urges the authorities to release them immediately and unconditionally.

Background

Valery Levonevsky is an outspoken critic of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and has protested about financial and administrative pressures being imposed on small businesses. Since 1996 he has been under close scrutiny by the authorities and subjected to searches, confiscation of property and questioning over various charges. In 2002 the strike committee led by Valery Levonevsky organized a strike of 120,000 small traders calling for President Lukashenka to be ousted and blaming him personally for the suppression of small businesses in Belarus. In April 2003 he was arrested while delivering a petition from market traders to the parliament and subsequently sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment for

taking part in the "March for a Better Life" on 12 March.

Valery Levonevsky and Alexandr Vasiliyev have been convicted under Article 368 (2) of the Criminal Code (Insulting the President). This is very similar to Article 367(2) (Libel Against the President of Belarus) which has been used in the past to suppress legitimate criticism of the government. In June 2004 Aksana Novikava was convicted under Article 367 (2) for distributing satirical leaflets and in June 2002 Nikolai Markevich and Pavel Mozheiko the editor and staff writer of *Pagonia* newspaper were convicted under the same article for raising concerns about President Lukashenka's involvement in "disappearances". In its Resolution on Freedom of the Press (Resolution 1372) in April 2004 the Council of Europe condemned the use of Article 367 to subject journalists to imprisonment and forced labour for criticism of the President and state officials.

For further information on Belarus see:

AI Index: EUR 49/013/2002
"Disappeared"

AI Index: EUR 49/004/2003

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AI Index: EUR 49/006/2003

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