

EXTERNAL

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Prisoners of conscience

30 July 1997

**BELARUS**  
**Pavel SHEREMET**  
**Dmitry ZAVADSKY**  
**Yaroslav OVCHINNIKOV**

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On 26 July 1997 three members of a Russian television crew, Pavel Sheremet, Minsk bureau chief of ORT, Russia's public television station, Dmitry Zavadsky, the cameraman, and Yaroslav Ovchinnikov, the crew's driver were detained in Belarus. This followed an unofficial visit made by the crew to the Belarussian border with Lithuania on 22 July to check the security situation (though they had previously been denied permission to do so from the Belarussian border guards).

During the trip the crew filmed an unguarded section of the border before proceeding to a border check point, allegedly, to interview the guards for the television program. There, they were detained by the border guards, who seized two video cassettes and filed a report about the incident. The crew were then reportedly released. Footage of the film retained by the crew was shown on ORT the same day.

On 26 July, Pavel Sheremet and Yaroslav Ovchinnikov were again detained, by border guards at Minsk airport as they returned from a trip to Bulgaria. They were taken to Grodno, a Belarussian town and regional administrative centre near the Lithuanian border, allegedly in connection with the 22 July incident. Dmitry Zavadsky was arrested at his home in Minsk on 26 July.

The three ORT crew members are currently in a temporary detention centre at the Leninsky District Department of Internal Affairs (ROVD) in Grodno. The case has apparently been transferred for investigation to the Belarussian Committee for State Security (KGB). According to the men's families, they have been given access to lawyers of their choice. No official charges have yet been brought against them but it is reported that they will be charged with violating Article 80 of the Belarussian Criminal Code, under which illegal border-crossing is punishable by imprisonment of up to five years. It has also been reported that additional charges of espionage may also be brought against the crew.

#### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

On 27 July, KGB officials arrived at the home of Pavel Sheremet in Minsk with a search warrant signed by the head of the Regional Department of KGB for Grodno Region, Vladimir Tupik. They had not obtained, however, an official order by the procurator as they explained this had not been possible due to the fact that it was Sunday. Also on 27 July law enforcement officials reportedly arrived at the ORT offices in Minsk in search of the video cassettes of the border film despite the fact that staff explained their only copy of the footage was already in Moscow. The officials then, allegedly, seized Pavel Sheremet's accreditation card, passport and draft articles.

Earlier in July the Belarussian authorities accused Pavel Sheremet of biased reporting (a second journalist, Aleksandr Stupnikov, a reporter for Russia's NTV television station was similarly accused and expelled from Belarus in March). On 9 July the Belarussian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stripped him of his media accreditation. During a press conference with President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in 1996, Pavel Sheremet reportedly asked him, "So, who

is going to be [arrested] next?" to which the President allegedly replied: "It could be you."

On 30 July the Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, was quoted by the media as threatening to revise the union charter with Belarus over the detention of the Russian television crew. President Yeltsin reportedly said that he was "surprised and indignant".

The circumstances of the detention of the ORT crew and the previous attempts by the authorities to prevent Pavel Sheremet from reporting on issues relating to Belarus for ORT, and his persecution by the authorities suggest that he and his crew members have been targeted solely because of their journalistic activities.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/express/airmail letters in Russian or your own language:**

-calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Pavel Sheremet, Dmitry Zavadsky and Yaroslav Ovchinnikov as prisoners of conscience, detained for their professional non-violent activities as members of the media;  
- seeking assurances that no one, including journalists, in the future will be subjected to ill-treatment or imprisonment solely on the grounds of their conscientiously held beliefs and for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression.

**APPEALS TO:**

The President of Belarus, Alyaksandr Lukashenka  
Respublika Belarus  
220010 g. Minsk  
pl. Nezavisimosti  
Apparat Prezidenta Respubliki Belarus  
Prezidentu Respubliki Belarus Lukashenka A.H  
BELARUS

**Telegrams: Prezidentu Lukashenka, Minsk, Belarus**

**Faxes: + 375 172 23-58-25**

**Salutation: Dear President**

The Procurator General of Belarus, Aleh Bozhelko  
Respublika Belarus  
220050 g. Minsk  
Ul. Internatsionalnaya, 22  
Prokuratura Respubliki Belarus  
Generalnomu prokuroru BOZHELKU A.  
BELARUS

**Telegrams: Generalnomu prokuroru, Minsk, Belarus**

**Salutation: Dear Procurator General**

Minister of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, Agolets, first name not known  
Respublika Belarus  
g. Minsk  
Ul. Urytskaha, 5  
Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del Respubliki Belarus  
Ministru Agoletsu  
BELARUS

**Telegrams: Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del, Minsk, Belarus**

**Faxes: +375 172 26-12-47**

**Salutation: Dear Minister**

**COPIES TO:**

The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Ivan Antonovich  
Respublika Belarus  
220030 g.Minsk  
Ul. Lenina, 19  
Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Respubliki Belarus  
Ministru Antonovich I.  
BELARUS

**Faxes: + 375 172 27-45-21**

**Fax numbers provided may also be telephone lines therefore please request "fax" if answered by a person.**

and to diplomatic representatives of BELARUS accredited to your country.

**PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.** Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 10 September 1997.