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Belarus: Punished for exercising their right to freedom of expression

The clampdown on all forms of opposition to the regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka in Belarus continues. In a blatant violation of their right to freedom of expression three more opposition politicians have been imprisoned to punish them for organizing peaceful protests over the past two weeks.

Andrei Klimov, Nikolai Statkevich and Pavel Severinets have all been sentenced under Article 342 of the criminal code which outlaws the organizing or participation in public actions that disrupt public order.

On 10 June **Andrei Klimov** was sentenced to a year and a half of “restricted Freedom” under Article 342 of the criminal code for organizing mass protests in Minsk on 25 March 2005. Andrei Klimov will live in an area outside Minsk under special police surveillance and will perform “community service”. Andrei Klimov was released in the courtroom pending his appeal. Investigations are still ongoing under another charge against Andrei Klimov for libel against the president. The date of the court hearing for that charge has yet to be announced.

On 31 May **Nikolai Statkevich** and **Pavel Severinets** were sentenced by Minsk Central District Court to three years of corrective labour under Article 342 for organizing protests in Minsk after the referendum and elections in October 2004. As a result of an amnesty declared in connection with the 60th anniversary of the Second World War their sentences were automatically reduced to two years. Nikolai Statkevich is already in detention where he is being held for contempt of court, because of his refusal to stand up during the trial, and Pavel Severinets remains at liberty pending an appeal. Nikolai Statkevich has refused to appeal in protest at the injustice of the legal process. Both men have been under constant pressure from the authorities for their opposition activities. Nikolai Statkevich, is chair of the social-democratic opposition party, and Pavel Severinets, is head of the Popular Front youth movement. Amnesty International is concerned over the increased risks citizens face for criticizing the government of Belarus and it is particularly alarming that the authorities have chosen to prosecute these three men under the criminal code as opposed to under the administrative code which carries much lighter sentences. It demonstrates the increasing intolerance towards any form of criticism or dissent by President Lukashenka.

Amnesty International considers **Nikolai Statkevich** to be a prisoner of conscience and demands his immediate and unconditional release, and asks for the charges against **Andrei Klimov** and **Pavel Severinets** to be dropped. Amnesty International will consider all three men to be prisoners of conscience if they are imprisoned or if their freedom is restricted under police surveillance.

Background

The demonstrations in October 2004 for which Nikolai Statkevich and Pavel Severinets were sentenced were held to protest against parliamentary elections and a referendum that were held on 17 October. The Belarusian authorities announced that in the referendum more than 77 percent of eligible voters had supported President Lukashenka, who has held power since 1994, to run for a third consecutive term.

Independent observers including those of the OSCE said that the elections and the referendum fell far short of democratic standards. About 50 demonstrators were herded onto buses by police with batons and 40 subsequently stood trial. Many including Pavel Severinets and Nikolai Statkevich were sentenced to administrative detentions of up to 15 days.

On 25 March 2005 up to 2,000 people gathered on October Square in the centre of Minsk to take part in the Freedom Day demonstration, which lasted approximately four hours. At least 30 people were arrested and a number of the detainees were severely beaten, particularly in police vans on the way to pre-trial detention centres throughout Minsk. Freedom Day commemorates the creation on 25 March 1918 of the Belarusian People's Republic (BPR), considered a forerunner of independent Belarus. It was a short-lived entity, as the Bolsheviks on 1 January 1919 announced the establishment of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, which later became part of the Soviet Union. For intelligentsia and a number of opposition parties in Belarus, Freedom Day is a symbol of national pride, but the authorities do not recognize the date, reportedly claiming the BPR was created by German occupation forces. Since Belarus gained its independence in 1991 the date has seen mass-scale protests, which have in past years also resulted in large-scale detentions.

For further information:

“Belarus: Suppressing the last voices of peaceful dissent” (AI Index: EUR 49/004/2005)