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Belarus: Valerii Levonevskii and Aleksander Vasiliev were imprisoned for publishing a poem

On 7 September 2004, the president and the deputy president of the national strike committee of market traders were sentenced to two years in prison for publicly insulting the president. The judge decreed that a leaflet which Valerii Levonevskii and Aleksander Vasiliev 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, Aleksander Vasiliev was convicted of disturbing public order by organizing demonstrations on 1 May in Grodno. The judge also decreed that computers and other equipment, which had earlier been taken from Valerii Levonevskii and Aleksander Vasiliev, would be confiscated "for the good of the state" and that both men were ordered to pay fines of 643,278 Belarusian roubles (\$300) each.

Valerii Levonevskii 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 Valerii Levonevskii 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. Valerii Levonevskii continued his political activism in the colony and as well as advising prisoners on their rights, he raised their awareness of human rights through discussions.

Valerii Levonevskii and Aleksander Vasiliev were convicted under Article 368 (2) of the Criminal Code (Insulting the President). This is very similar to Article 367(2) (Libel Against the President) that has been used in the past to suppress legitimate criticism of the government. 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.

Amnesty International considered both men to be prisoners of conscience and campaigned for their release. Amnesty International members and members of the public sent numerous appeals to the Belarusian authorities asking for the release of the two prisoners of conscience. They were joined by some famous musicians: Yevgenii Fyodorov from the group *Tequila jazz*, Boris Grebenshikov of *Aquarium*, Sergei Shnurov of *Leningrad* and Aleksander Vasiliev of *Spleen* who all joined the campaign.

Aleksander Vasiliev was released on 7 July 2005 under an amnesty declared by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka to commemorate the end of the Second World. Valerii Levonevskii served the full two years of

his sentence and was released on 15 May this year.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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