

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **Belarus: Amnesty International demands fair trial for possible Prisoner of Conscience**

Mikhail Marinich, an opposition leader, may be being targeted solely because of his political opposition to the government. The authorities in Belarus must ensure that he is tried according to international standards, Amnesty International said today.

Mikhail Marinich will stand trial on 23 December at the Minsk District Court accused of illegal possession of firearms and theft of computers through misuse of his official position. If he is found guilty he could face a prison sentence of up to 15 years.

"Mikhail Marinich is entitled to a fair trial. The judge must be free to make a decision impartially on the basis of facts and without any undue pressures," Heather McGill, the organization's researcher on Belarus said.

The numerous charges and irregular procedures combined with the repeated extensions of his detention make it seem likely that Mikhail Marinich is being prosecuted for political reasons to punish him for his peaceful opposition activities. Human rights organizations in Belarus assert that the charges are fabricated. Amnesty International does not have enough information to make a judgement about the charges, but if this is the case and Mikhail Marinich is sentenced to imprisonment Amnesty International would consider him to be a prisoner of conscience and would call for his immediate and unconditional release.

"This is yet another example of the high cost that has to be paid in Belarus for opposing the regime," Heather McGill said.

Amnesty International is concerned that Mikhail Marinich may not receive a fair trial and that his lawyer Vera Stremkovskaya, may be hampered in her work. Vera Stremkovskaya is due to appear before the Minsk city lawyers association to answer a charge that she smuggled correspondence for her client. She could face a disciplinary procedure. The organization has repeatedly expressed its concerns about the independence of the judiciary in Belarus.

### **Background**

Mikhail Marinich, who is former Minister for External Economic Relations, former Ambassador to Latvia, Estonia and Finland and ran in the Presidential elections in 2001, has been held in pre-trial detention since

26 April 2004. He was first detained on 24 April for a driving offence and after his possessions and money were confiscated he was released. He was later summoned to the KGB investigation committee offices where he was told that the money was counterfeit. KGB officers then took him to his dacha which was searched and where an unlicensed pistol was found. Mikhail Marinich has denied that the pistol belonged to him. The pistol was reportedly in a plastic bag and there were no fingerprints. There was also evidence that the dacha had been broken into, but the break-in has not been investigated.

On 30 August 2004, Mikhail Marinich was charged with theft of computers from the organization, *Delovaya Initsiyativa*, of which he is the President. Other members of *Delovaya Initsiyativa* have reportedly informed his lawyer that they had agreed that he should store the computers in his garage temporarily.

Mikhail Marinich reportedly suffers from a heart condition which is aggravated by conditions in detention, where he is held in a cell with 3 other detainees who smoke heavily. Mikhail Marinich's lawyer has repeatedly appealed against the detention, but all appeals have been turned down.

#### Public Document

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