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Belarus: No Freedom of Expression

The conviction of Oksana Novikova for distributing leaflets critical of president Lukashenko is a further proof of Belarus's total disregard for international human rights standards and legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of expression, Amnesty International said in response to her sentencing yesterday.

Oksana Novikova was arrested while distributing leaflets in a tunnel at Minsk Passazhirsky Station on April 5. The leaflets were in the form a "wanted" poster with a portrait of President Lukashenko and a list of unlawful acts including the "disappearances" of prominent opposition politicians and a journalist in 1999. She was sentenced to two and a half years at a corrective labour facility.

Amnesty International considers Oksana Novikova to be a prisoner of conscience.

Background

Oksana Novikova was convicted under Article 367(2) of the Criminal Code of Belarus (Libel Against the President of Belarus). This article has been used in the past to suppress legitimate criticism of the government and in June 2002 Nikolai Markevich and Pavel Mozheiko the editor and staff writer of Pagonia newspaper were also convicted under the same article for raising concerns about President Lukashenko's involvement in "disappearances".

Belarus has come under consistent criticism from inter-governmental organizations for its blatant violation of international standards. In May this year the Council of Europe rejected an application from Belarus to renew its special status with the organization which had been suspended when President Lukashenko dissolved the parliament in 1997. In its Resolution on Freedom of the Press the Council of Europe also condemned the use of Article 367 to subject journalists to imprisonment and forced labour for criticism of the President and state officials.

Public Document

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