

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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Call for a prompt, impartial and effective investigation into the death of journalist Aleh Byabenin

Amnesty International has written today to the Prosecutor General of Belarus calling for a prompt, impartial and effective investigation into the recent death of the founder of the unofficial news website Charter'97, Aleh Byabenin.

Aleh Byabenin's body was found at 5.30pm on 3 September at his *dacha* outside Minsk by close friends and family members, who had become alarmed when he had not made contact since the previous night. He was found with a rope around his neck suspended from the banisters of the house. On 4 September, the initial conclusions of a forensic medical examination were announced, which found that the most likely cause of death was suicide. The final conclusions will be announced by the end of September.

Close colleagues and friends of Aleh Byabenin have questioned this possible cause of death and told Amnesty International that he was a happily married man with two children, who had just returned from a holiday with his family, and had no reason to kill himself. Shortly before his death, he joined the campaign team of Andrei Sannikov, presidential candidate for the civic movement "European Belarus". On 2 September, he had reportedly sent text messages to friends arranging to meet them at a cinema that evening, but he never turned up.

Eyewitnesses who discovered the body reported a number of inconsistencies; they saw bruises on his body and dirt on his hands which suggested he may have been involved in a struggle; there were two empty bottles of Belarusian Balsam, a high alcohol content liqueur, in the living room of the dacha, yet Aleh Byabenin reportedly never drank Belarusian Balsam; he was wearing a jacket and did not leave a suicide note.

Opposition politicians and colleagues have voiced concerns that Aleh Byabenin may have been targeted by the authorities because of his profession as an independent journalist and his new role on Andrei Sannikov's election campaign team. Aleh Byabenin had been attacked in the past: in April 1997 he was allegedly abducted, taken to woods and subjected to a mock execution, and in September 1999, he was badly beaten by far-right activists when he came to the aid of Andrei Sannikov who was also being beaten. In March this year, the Charter'97 offices were searched by 10 police officers, allegedly in connection with a criminal investigation into corruption in the police force. Natallya Radzina, a journalist for Charter'97 was hit in the face as the police officers forced their way into the Charter'97 flat. Police also searched the homes of several journalists working for the website. Natallya Radzina has also reported that she and the staff of the Charter'97 website have received anonymous threats since Aleh Byabenin's death.

Amnesty International is calling on the authorities to ensure the safety of opposition politicians and journalists in the run-up to the presidential elections on 19 December, and to dispel any doubts about the cause of death of Aleh Byabenin by carrying out a prompt, impartial and effective investigation. The organization further asks the authorities to keep Aleh Byabenin's family informed as to the progress of the investigation and to make the findings public as far as is possible; to facilitate the participation of international forensic experts in the

investigation and if consent is given by the family to grant any request for a second autopsy to be carried out on the body.

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