

# Belarus

## Human rights defenders speakers' tour

### Profile - Iryna Toustsik

Iryna Toustsik (23) is the human rights officer for “Zubr”, a pro-democracy and human rights youth movement in Belarus. Her job is to monitor harassment of “Zubr” activists including arbitrary detentions and police ill-treatment. She prepares documents for complaints against the police, ensures media coverage of detentions and also looks after the welfare of the detainees ensuring that they get food parcels. She ensures that the organization always knows where its activists are being detained.



Iryna Toustsik, 2005. ©Zubr

for the “Zubr” movement. On 28 December 2004 she was detained for three hours for taking part in an action to show support for the “orange revolution” events in Ukraine.

Iryna Toustsik is one of the founding members of “Zubr” and has been an activist in the movement since 2000. Since the start of their public activities at the beginning of 2001, in common with other “Zubr” activists, she has been subjected to arbitrary detention on many occasions. In April 2001 she took part in an anti-presidential event in Gorky Park in Minsk during which “Zubr” activists poked fun at President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. She was detained with a group of activists, including one other young woman for five days. This was the first time that female “Zubr” activists had been detained. According to Iryna Toustsik this experience served to strengthen her activism. Since that time she has been detained numerous times on administrative charges for opposition activities which included distributing a registered newspaper and distributing stickers

In March 2005 Iryna Toustsik was expelled from university. The reason she was given by the university authorities was that she had not sat her exams on time; however, she had already heard rumours that she was going to be targeted for her opposition activities. In December 2004 she had published an article in the opposition newspaper *Narodnaia Volia* in which she expressed her concern that the presidential elections to be held in 2006 would not be fair. This was allegedly the last straw for the university administration.

Iryna Toustsik is passionate about Belarusian culture and language and has attended Belarusian language schools since she first started school. She writes poetry and prose in Belarusian and has a keen interest in Belarusian folklore and music.

“Zubr”<sup>1</sup> is a non-registered pro-democracy and human rights movement formed at the beginning of 2001 and is comprised of predominantly young Belarusians. At an inaugural meeting, held in a park in Minsk on 13 February 2001, the aims of the organization were described as follows: “The acts of evil by the dictatorship are well-known: disappearances, pressure on journalists, the elimination of the native language and culture of the people of Belarus, torture of prisoners. ... The organization has chosen “Zubr” as a symbol of power derived from nature, and will base its activities on non-violent resistance to dictatorship.”<sup>2</sup> Since the formation of their movement, “Zubr” members have been regularly subjected to harassment, ill-treatment and arbitrary detention due to their visible peaceful protest actions against the regime of President Lukashenka.

### **Background**

Life is becoming increasingly difficult for those who speak out against the authorities in Belarus. Since the elections and referendum in October 2004, which lifted restrictions on his term of office, President Lukashenka appears to be asserting his control over civil society and clamping down on opposition with renewed confidence. The Belarusian authorities regularly employ harassment, intimidation, excessive force, mass detentions and long-term imprisonment as methods to quash voices of dissent in Belarusian society. Although Belarus has come under increasing international criticism for its poor human rights record, most recently at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR)<sup>3</sup>, this criticism is met with defiance by the regime.

Peaceful demonstrators are regularly subjected to ill-treatment at the hands of riot police and arbitrarily detained. Leading members of the opposition, human rights defenders and journalists who voice criticism risk criminal charges for slandering the President. In the past two years a disturbing number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), directly and indirectly engaged in the promotion and defence of human rights in Belarus, have been closed on the basis of controversial legislation and regulations, widely considered as restrictive. Journalists and independent newspapers are increasingly under threat as the state attempts to assert its control over mass media. The independence of the judiciary has also increasingly been called into question, both domestically and internationally, as illustrated in the course of a number of recent highly politicized trials of critics of the regime.

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<sup>1</sup> Zubr in Russian means bison.

<sup>2</sup> *Belaruskaia Delovaia Gazeta*, 14 February 2001.

<sup>3</sup> UN Doc. *Situation of human rights in Belarus* (E/CN.4/2005/L.32), 12 April 2005.