

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Public Statement

8 March 2017

AI Index: EUR 49/5842/2017

### **Belarus: Reprisals against participants in recent peaceful rallies**

Thousands of people joined peaceful street rallies under the slogan “My nie darmoyedy!” (“We are not spongers!”) in Minsk, Homel, Vytebsk and other cities and towns across Belarus between 17 and 26 February. Contrary to common practice in recent years, the rallies had not been expressly authorised in advance by the authorities but were still allowed to proceed, in central locations, by the police.

However, whilst no-one was detained during the rallies, the Belarusian police have since summoned for questioning numerous activists who took part in the demonstrations in Minsk and Homel. According to information received by Amnesty International, at least 18 individuals have been summoned by the police and issued with fines in connection with these rallies, while others have been called in for questioning only. The questioning concerned the reasons for them joining the street protests, and appeared to be intended as a form of intimidation.

Summoning or fining participants for their peaceful participation in rallies, or in any other way taking steps to suppress peaceful dissent, is contrary to the Belarusian authorities’ obligation to respect the right to freedom of peaceful assembly. Reprisals against peaceful protesters must stop, and this right should be fully respected in Belarus.

### Background

The recent demonstrations, some of which were spontaneous, were prompted by tax bills that hundreds of thousands of unemployed Belarusians had received in recent months under the Presidential Decree “On Prevention of Social Dependency”. The Decree, adopted in 2015, stipulates a special tax for those who have been unemployed and not payed any tax contributions for over 183 days in any given tax year, or administrative arrest and compulsory community service in lieu of the tax, which may amount to a form of forced labour. Since the beginning of 2016, more than 400,000 people, who have not been in any regular employment, have received notices from the tax authorities stating that they are required to pay BYR 460 (US\$ 245) under this provision, which is commonly known as the “tax on parasites”.

On 2 March, members of the informal coalition of political and civil society groups who spearheaded the demonstrations reported that at least 18 people who had helped organise the protests in Minsk and Homel had since been summoned by police and issued with fines

for violating Article 23.34 of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Republic of Belarus (violation of the rules governing public assemblies and street protest).

All public gatherings in Belarus require prior explicit authorization from the authorities. The law “On Mass Gatherings in the Republic of Belarus”, adopted in 1997 and repeatedly amended since, to introduce increasingly restrictive regulations, requires all organisers of assemblies to submit an application for approval to the authorities 15 days before the date of the planned assembly. For many years, permission to hold public assemblies has often been routinely and arbitrarily denied to those who intended to hold protests.

The exercise of the right to a free and peaceful assembly should not require prior authorisation from the authorities. According to international human rights law, states may require notice of assemblies in order to facilitate the right of peaceful assembly and in order to take measures to protect public safety and order or the rights of others. However, failure to comply with notice requirements should not lead to fines or imprisonment. Those organizing or participating in peaceful assemblies should not be asked to bear the costs of public services (such as policing) for the assembly and should not be held liable for the conduct of others.

END/

Public Document

\*\*\*\*\*

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566 or email: [press@amnesty.org](mailto:press@amnesty.org)

International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK  
[www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)