

**PUBLIC**

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**Health concern/prisoner of conscience**

**11 March 2005**

**BELARUS**

**Mikhail Marinich (m), aged 65**

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Imprisoned opposition politician Mikhail Marinich reportedly suffered a stroke on 7 March 2005. His lawyer and family were not informed, and only found out on 10 March, when a fellow-inmate who had just been released contacted a newspaper, which then called the family. They have expressed concern that Mikhail Marinich is not receiving appropriate medical treatment, and fear that his life is in danger.

Mikhail Marinich, a former Minister for External Economic Relations, resigned in July 2001 from the position of Ambassador to Latvia, Finland and Estonia. He had put himself forward as a candidate in the September 2001 presidential elections, reportedly saying, "I do not find it possible to tolerate the system of dictatorship, economic degradation, abduction of politicians and constant violation of civil rights and freedoms." He remains a vocal member of the opposition movement, in particular criticizing the government's economic policies.

On 30 December 2004 he was sentenced to five years' imprisonment in a hard labour colony, and "confiscation of [his] property", including US\$41,900 confiscated during the criminal investigation. He was convicted of "embezzlement by means of abuse of his official position executed on a large scale". The court accused him of embezzling computers which had been loaned by the US embassy to the NGO *Delovaia Initsiativa*, which was chaired by Mikhail Marinich. The US embassy had submitted documents to the court to say that it had no complaint and reportedly members of *Delovaia Initsiativa* had given evidence that they had agreed that Mikhail Marinich should store the computers on his property.

Observers came to the trial from organizations including the European Union (EU) and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), as well as local organizations such as the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, who had followed the criminal proceedings. They expressed considerable doubt about the fairness of the trial and the final court ruling.

Amnesty International believes the charges were fabricated, intended solely to punish him for his opposition political activities and silence his open criticism of the state authorities, and considers him a prisoner of conscience. In August 2004 the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention was refused permission to visit him in pre-trial detention. His sentence of five years' imprisonment was reduced on appeal to three-and-a-half years, in February 2005.

Mikhail Marinich reportedly suffers from a chronic heart condition, which was aggravated by harsh conditions at the KGB pre-trial detention centre in Minsk where he was first held, in a cell with three other detainees who smoked heavily. He was taking medication for his heart condition, and took this with him when he was transferred to the Orsha prison colony no. 8 (Vitebsk region) at the beginning of March. He complained of feeling unwell on 4 March, but was not allowed to take his medication, because the pre-trial detention facility in Minsk had not sent his medical records with him. On 7 March an ambulance was called, as his condition had deteriorated, and the ambulance crew established that he had had a stroke.

#### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Life is becoming increasingly difficult for those who speak out against the regime of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who has been in power since 1994. Amnesty International has repeatedly expressed concern about the imprisonment on trumped-up charges of high-profile political opponents of President Lukashenka. An October 2004 referendum lifted the two-term limit on the President's time in office, and since then

President Lukashenka appears to be asserting his control over civil society and clamping down on the opposition with renewed confidence.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English, Russian or your own language:**

- expressing serious concern for Mikhail Marinich, who reportedly suffered a stroke on 7 March, and seeking assurances that he will be given all the medical treatment he requires;
- calling for him to be released immediately and unconditionally, as he is a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for the expression of his political beliefs and peaceful opposition activities.

**APPEALS TO: Fax machines are usually switched off outside office hours (GMT+2). If a voice answers, repeat "fax" until connected.**

President

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**Salutation:** Dear President Lukashenka

General Prosecutor

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**Salutation:** Dear General Prosecutor

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**Salutation:** Dear Minister

**COPIES TO:**

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and to diplomatic representatives of Belarus accredited to your country.

**PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.** Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 22 April 2005.