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Belarus: Georgians held as prisoners of conscience as clampdown on opposition continues

Two activists from the youth movement Kmara in Georgia, Luka Tsuladze and Giorgi Kandelaki, have become the latest victims of President Lukashenka's clampdown on all forms of opposition during their visit to Belarus. They were detained on 24 August in Minsk along with Uladzimir Kobets from Zubr, the Belarusian youth opposition movement. Uladzimir Kobets was released after two hours and reportedly one of the police officers offered his apologies saying that his detention had been a mistake and that the operation had been aimed against "persons from the Caucasus". The two Georgians were told that they were being held because of doubts about the authenticity of their passports.

An official from the State Security Committee (KGB) announced on Belarusian television on 25 August that they would be deported and went on to say: "During their stay in the country, they made contacts with representatives of radical, politicized, unregistered structures, such as Zubr, Youth Front, and Limon, and held a number of training seminars on the organization of civil-disobedience actions accompanied by mass unrest, similar to those during the colour revolution in Georgia."

Luka Tuladze and Giorgi Kandelaki were held incommunicado without any charges being laid against them in the pre trial detention centre in the Moskovskii district of Minsk until 29 August. On 29 August they were charged by Moskovskii district court with "petty hooliganism" for allegedly swearing at a third inmate in their cell, and given an administrative sentence of 15 days imprisonment. Their lawyer is currently appealing this charge on the grounds that the charge has been fabricated and that there are no witness statements to support the allegations. Only on 30 August, six days after their detention, were they allowed access to a lawyer and to Georgian consular officials who travelled from Ukraine and Russia.

Amnesty International considers Luka Tsuladze and Giorgi Kandelaki to be prisoners of conscience who should be immediately and unconditionally released. Amnesty International believes that the two men are being held solely for their political activities, to punish them for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression, and that the administrative charge against them has been fabricated. Amnesty International has previously documented cases where detainees were falsely charged with attacking their cell mates as a way of prolonging their detention. For example, in March 2005, Anatoli Shumchenko who had been sentenced to 10 days' administrative imprisonment for organizing an unsanctioned meeting was charged on the day he was due to be released with "hooliganism" for allegedly attacking his cell mate and was immediately moved to a pre-trial detention centre. He denied the allegations and the charges were eventually dropped.

Amnesty International is also urging the release of three Belarusian prisoners of conscience who were detained on 26 August when a group of Zubr activists protested in the centre of Minsk against the detention of the two Georgians. Natalya Ushko, Alyaksandr Kurbitski, and Alyaksey Lyaukovich were

sentenced on 30 August to 10 days' administrative detention for participating in an unsanctioned mass meeting. Amnesty International likewise considers that they were arrested solely for the peaceful exercise of their human rights.

Background

The youth movement Kmara played a key role in the protests that led to the fall of the previous government in the so-called "Rose Revolution" in November 2003 and that brought the current government under President Saakashvili to power. Kmara has close links with opposition youth movements in other countries such as Zubr 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 peaceful opposition with renewed confidence. In April 2005 30 people including 14 Russians (including youth members of political parties "Yabloko" and Union of Right Forces), five Ukrainians and 13 Belarusians were handed down sentences of up to 15 days' imprisonment or heavy fines for participating in or organizing an unsanctioned meeting to commemorate the 19th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

According to reports the detainees were sentenced without legal representation or where appropriate, access to their respective consulates. There are also signs that President Lukashenka particularly fears the "bad influence" of youth activists from Georgia. In June he issued a decree introducing visa requirements for Georgians travelling to Belarus. However following a draft resolution by the Georgian parliament banning Lukashenka from entering Georgia, no legislation was introduced to implement the decree. In the draft resolution the Georgian parliament described President Lukashenka as a "dictator excommunicated from Europe".

Over the past months Georgian President Saakashvili has made highly critical statements about the regime in Belarus. He criticized the "unwritten rule within the CIS that its leaders were not supposed to discuss each other" and added that "for us the main rule is the protection of democracy and freedom". On 10 May, as reported by *Black Sea Press*, he specifically singled out Belarus from the CIS and compared it with the regimes in Zimbabwe, Burma and Cuba.