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Belarus: Right to speak out violated ahead of presidential elections

At a time when the right to speak out should have been unassailable, the run-up to Sunday's presidential elections has been marred by the crude attempts of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's government to silence political opponents, Amnesty International stated today.

"The election trail should have been regarded as a window of opportunity for free and fair debate and to place Belarus' failing human rights record back on the country's political agenda, not to increase the campaign of harassment and intimidation against oppositional voices", the organization stated.

Amnesty International is calling on President Lukashenka to ensure that, both in the remaining period before - as well after - Sunday's presidential election, the fundamental human rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are observed.

"President Lukashenka's government must affirm its commitment to respect the right of ordinary Belarusians to speak out against it", the organization said. "Amnesty International will adopt as prisoners of conscience anyone who is imprisoned for peacefully exercising these rights".

The government should also ensure that no one will be tortured or ill-treated as a consequence of their peaceful opposition activities.

"It is clear that President Lukashenka has made good use of the state apparatus in the pre-election period in order to silence independent thought and action", Amnesty International stated. "If his government continues on this course, its risks further international condemnation".

Amnesty International is calling on President Lukashenka to ensure that fundamental human rights are respected.

Background:

In the pre-election period Amnesty International has received frequent accounts of arbitrary official action, apparently aimed at stifling the rights of freedom of expression and assembly. The following are only a small number of the reported violations of these rights received by the organization in recent weeks:

On 1 September five police officers reportedly attempted to forcibly enter the press office of the Minsk-based human rights and pro-democracy organization, *Charter-97*. The organization's equipment reportedly only narrowly escaped being confiscated.

Three days previously, on 27 and 28 August one of Belarus' most prominent human rights organizations, *Spring-96*, reportedly received two official warnings

from the Ministry of Justice. It is now threatened with imminent closure; Throughout August members of the *ZUBR* human rights and pro-democracy youth movement were detained by police officers on almost a daily basis after staging peaceful anti-government protests in various Belarusian cities. While a minority of detainees were held overnight and charged with violating public order, most were released after several hours.

On 28 August 40,000 copies of the newspaper, *Rabochy*, which favours the main opposition presidential candidate, Vladimir Goncharik, were seized by state officials at the *Magic* printing house in Minsk.

According to the Belarusian human rights organization *Charter-97*, late in the evening on 27 August 10 armed police officers raided the home of an election agent for Vladimir Goncharik in Brest. Police officers allegedly seized samples of election materials.

On 23 August officials raided the office of Belarus' largest independent newspaper, *Narodnaya Volya*, reportedly confiscating 10 computers. The independent newspapers, *Nasha Svaboda* and *Belaruskaya Delovaya Gazeta* were also reportedly subjected to a raid by officials the day previously.

On 21 August around 20 state officials raided the Minsk office of the Belarusian Voters Club, confiscating office equipment and materials. Officials had previously visited the offices of this election monitoring organization on 17 and 20 August demanding information about the equipment being used in its office. On 17 August the authorities seized 300,000 copies of a special election issue of the independent newspaper, Nasha Svaboda, from the Magic printing house due to alleged inaccuracies in the printing house's financial records. On the same day Nasha Svaboda reportedly received a warning from the State Press Committee for publishing an article about members of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's government.

On 8 and 9 August officers from the Committee for State Security (KGB) raided an office being used by the ZUBR human rights and pro-democracy youth movement in Gomel, on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border, confiscating office equipment and detaining several youth activists.

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