

URGENT ACTION

OUTSPOKEN PSYCHIATRIST RELEASED

Psychiatrist Igor Postnov who was forcibly detained and treated in a psychiatric hospital following his outspoken criticism of the health care system in Belarus, has been allowed to go home.

Igor Postnov was discharged from Vitebsk Regional Psychiatric hospital on 30 September, so that he could be treated as an outpatient. He has now resumed work, however, the diagnosis of his “psychopathic personality disorder with a mania for persecuting the authorities” still stands, and he may face further treatment if he continues with his outspoken criticism of the authorities.

On 12 September, a closed session of the Vitebsk Regional Court attended only by a prosecutor and representatives of the medical institution upheld the decision of the lower court that Igor Postnov should be forcibly treated in the Vitebsk Regional Centre for Psychiatry and Narcology. He is now challenging his illegal detention in the psychiatric hospital in court. Igor Postnov described his stay in hospital as psychological torture; he was denied any contact with the outside world including contact with his lawyer, phone calls or parcels, and he wasn't aware of the fact that human rights defenders, activists and his friends had started a campaign for his release. Initially he refused any treatment, but when doctors threatened to keep him longer in the hospital if he refused, he agreed to take the prescribed medicines.

Igor Postnov thanked Amnesty International for the appeals sent on his behalf: “I am sure the letters played a role in my release, but it is not just about me. It is very frightening if the government is going to use these methods to fight against dissidents.” Amnesty International will continue to support Igor Postnov's case and will assist in arranging for an independent medical examination for him.

No further action is requested at this time from the UA network. Many thanks to all who sent appeals.

This is the first update of UA 235/13. Further information: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR49/016/2013/en>

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Igor Postnov, a psychiatrist working at the Vitebsk Regional Centre for Psychiatry and Narcology, has released a number of interviews over the past 18 months on YouTube criticizing government policy and the management of health care in the city. In his interviews he has raised issues such as medical errors, misuse of funds; in June 2013, he criticized the police's use of in-patient psychiatric testing to deal with homeless people and vagrants.

On 16 August, after Igor Postnov published a number of statements on YouTube criticizing local health policy, a Psychiatric Commission at the hospital where he worked concluded that he required forced psychiatric treatment for a "psychopathic personality disorder with a mania for persecuting the authorities". That day, Igor Postnov phoned a journalist from Radio Free Europe to say he was detained, after which his phone was disconnected. On 21 August the Vitebsk Regional Court ruled in a closed sitting that Igor Postnov should be forcibly treated in the Vitebsk Regional Centre for Psychiatry and Narcology. The court order stated that he required psychiatric treatment against his will because of a "persistent delusional disorder" which presented a danger to himself and others. The court order does not explain how Igor Postnov represents a danger to society and mentions only his publications on the internet.

According to principle 16 of the UN Principles for the Protection of Persons with Mental Illness and the Improvement of Mental Health Care involuntary psychiatric treatment should only be resorted to in cases of severe mental illness for the shortest possible time and where there is an immediate or imminent risk that the person will harm themselves or others.

In Belarus, the right to freedom of expression is frequently violated, and individuals who criticize the authorities often face prosecution. The rights to freedom of assembly and association are also curtailed and any form of critical public action, even a one-person picket, is subject to permission which is rarely granted, and peaceful demonstrators face fines or short prison sentences. Human rights activists, political activists and other civil society activists and groups face constant bureaucratic hurdles, harassment such as prosecution and fines for public order offences. Belarus' disregard for human rights, including violations of the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association has led to international condemnation and isolation of the country. Belarus is not a member of the Council of Europe and its special guest status was suspended in 1997 after widely contested elections. Belarus is the only country in Europe and Central Asia that still executes prisoners – it maintains the death penalty for "premeditated, aggravated murder" and 12 other peacetime offences.

For further information see the recent Amnesty International report published in April 2013: *What is not permitted is prohibited: Silencing civil society in Belarus* (EUR 49/002/2013), <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR49/002/2013/en>.

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Gender m/f: m

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