

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Public Statement

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### Concerns about imprisonment of Alyaksandr Kazulin

Amnesty International is concerned by the harsh sentence handed down to Alyaksandr Kazulin, leader of the Belarusian Socialist Democratic Party, *Narodnaya Hramada*, former presidential candidate and former rector of the Belarusian State University. Alyaksandr Kazulin was sentenced to five-and-a-half years' imprisonment by the Moskovsky District Court in Minsk on 13 July 2006. Amnesty International believes that the sentence is part of an ongoing, systematic campaign of harassment, intimidation and obstruction by the Belarusian authorities against Alyaksandr Kazulin, and calls for two of the three charges to be dropped.

Alyaksandr Kazulin was charged, under the provisions of the Belarusian Criminal Code, with "hooliganism", article 339, part 2, and, with "the organization of group activities that breach public order or active participation in similar activities", article 342, part 1. The prosecutor called for Alyaksandr Kazulin to be sentenced to a total of six years' imprisonment, three years on each charge. The judge sentenced him to five and a half years.

The charge of "hooliganism" relates to two separate events. The first event took place on 17 February, when Alyaksandr Kazulin was reportedly prevented by Special Purpose Police Unit (SPPU) officers from entering the National Press Centre, where he intended to hold a press conference. The incident reportedly resulted in a clash between members of Alyaksandr Kazulin's party and the SPPU.

The second event took place on 2 March, when Alyaksandr Kazulin attempted to gain entry to the 3<sup>rd</sup> All Belarusian People's Assembly in Minsk, which was being addressed by President Lukashenka and which Alyaksandr Kazulin was legally entitled to attend as a presidential candidate. As was widely covered in the international media, Alyaksandr Kazulin was beaten and detained when he tried to register as a participant of the conference along with a group of supporters. Witnesses said that when Alyaksandr Kazulin and his supporters tried to approach the registration desk, they were beaten by a group of 30-40 plain clothes law enforcement officers.

Alyaksandr Kazulin was then driven away in a police van where he reports he was "placed between the seats, on my back, with my legs pressed against my head. I was drowning in my own blood". He was subsequently held in a police station for eight hours, where he was reportedly beaten further and denied medical treatment. Angered by the ill-treatment, Alyaksandr Kazulin allegedly broke the glass of a portrait of President Lukashenka which was in the police station. He was later released. Twelve of his supporters who went to the police station to support him were also reportedly beaten and detained. In a further incident on the same day, police fired guns at a car driven by his supporters who were trying to film the detentions.

The second charge of "organization of group activities that breach public order or active participation in similar activities" was brought against him after the huge street demonstrations in Minsk on 25 March, when thousands of protestors filled the streets to mark Freedom Day. Following speeches in a public park,

Alyaksandr Kazulin led protestors on a march to Akrestina prison, where hundreds of people had previously been detained during the demonstrations which followed the presidential elections on 19 March. Government security forces reportedly used excessive force to break up the march, at which point Alyaksandr Kazulin suggested that the demonstrators head to a nearby church to pray. Turning his back on the security officers, Alyaksandr Kazulin was reportedly struck repeatedly on the back by officers. Others were also beaten. Alyaksandr Kazulin, along with hundreds of others, was then detained at Akrestina prison.

Amnesty International notes the minor offence committed by Alyaksandr Kazulin, in breaking the glass of a portrait of President Lukashenka on 2 March. However, the sentence handed down to him of five and half years is a part of the clampdown on freedom of expression generally in Belarus, and is also illustrative of the blatant harassment that he has suffered at the hands of the Belarusian authorities. Hundreds of demonstrators who were arrested during the demonstrations that took place between 19 – 25 March were charged with “hooliganism” according to the administrative code and sentenced to between 10-15 days administrative detention.

Furthermore, Amnesty International believes that the sentence handed down for “hooliganism”, based on the events of 17 February, and the second sentence of “organization of group activities that breach public order or active participation in similar activities”, based on the events of 25 March, are politically motivated. Alyaksandr Kazulin’s imprisonment constitutes a violation his rights to freedom of expression and assembly, as guaranteed by articles 19 and 21 respectively of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Belarus is a state party. Moreover, this harsh sentence has apparently been handed down in order to prevent Alyaksandr Kazulin’s peaceful political activities and to intimidate others. The organization is calling for these charges to be dropped.

### **Background**

Amnesty International has monitored the Belarusian authorities’ treatment of Alyaksandr Kazulin, members of his electoral campaign team, his family and his lawyer during the period of the March presidential elections. On various occasions, activists from his electoral headquarters were detained and beaten and had equipment seized by the security forces. Alyaksandr Kazulin’s lawyer, Ihor Rynkevich was also charged with “petty hooliganism” following his detention on 2 March. He was subsequently acquitted due to lack of evidence. At the end of March, Alyaksandr Kazulin’s brother, Uladzimir Kazulin, was arrested and sentenced to five days detention. He was charged with insubordination to police demands while trying to investigate his brother’s arrest on 2 March.

Amnesty International believes that the continuing harassment and detention of opposition figures, and those involved in civil society activity generally, is a deliberate attempt by the authorities to intimidate and deter people from exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly. The result is the continued stifling of open, public debate and activity within Belarus.