

Political Prisoners as Part of Belarus Electoral Process

Belarusian opposition activist Siarhei Kavalenka may soon die as a result of a 59-day hunger strike against his criminal prosecution. He and other 14 opposition and civil society activists remain in prisons for their political views. US and EU officials, including Hillary Clinton and Catherine Ashton, repeatedly called for a release of all political prisoners before any negotiations with Belarus on improvement of bilateral relations. However, Belarusian authorities are not keen to listen after Russia agreed to supply them oil and gas on extremely beneficial terms.

Like other authoritarian rulers, Alexander Lukashenka tries to isolate potential leaders from different social backgrounds who might be dangerous for his grip on power. Authorities initiate administrative prosecution to suppress everyday activities and criminal cases usually target the most influential activists or organisations. The idea is that it would also deter others from attempts to damage the regime. Imprisonment and release of political prisoners seems to be linked to the election cycle in Belarus and Russia's economic subsidies.

"Presidential" Crackdowns

Since late 1990s imprisonment for political reasons has been a characteristic feature of the Belarusian authoritarian regime. Several people lost their freedom before and after the presidential election in 2006, including former Minister of Foreign Economic Affairs Mikhail Marinich, former Belarusian State University rector and presidential candidate Aliaksandr Kazulin, several opposition leaders, former members of Parliament, businessmen and young

activists. Nevertheless, authorities released all of them before the 2008 parliamentary election as a result of Belarus-EU negotiations. It let Belarus join the EU Eastern Partnership and, among other benefits, get [an IMF loan of \\$3.46bn](#).

There were no political prisoners between August 2008 and December 2010 when the EU pursued an engagement policy towards Belarus. Nobody thought that the history would repeat after the 2010 presidential election. Unexpectedly for all observers, up to 700 opposition activists were arrested and at least 57 persons were charged or prosecuted, including seven of the ten presidential candidates. Later Belarusian courts sentenced 29 of them to prison terms despite objections of international organisations and Belarusian human rights groups.

Prisoners as Part of the Electoral Process

There is a certain pattern in how political prisoners re-appear depending on the Belarusian election cycle. New people go to prisons after each presidential election as a reaction of authorities to excessive politicisation of the population. This way Lukashenka wants to demonstrate Belarusians that they should abstain from politics, with the exception of election months. Then authorities use parliamentary elections in order to release the majority of political prisoners and improve the relations with the West before the next presidential election.

The reason of "showing an example" was especially adequate for the regime in 2011 when Belarus faced the worst economic crisis since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Trade unions, businessmen associations and groups of workers were reluctant to actively protest against the deterioration of the economic situation when they saw what the potential consequences personally for them.

From Presidential Candidates to Anarchists

Only four of those who were criminally prosecuted after the recent election still remain in prison. They are former presidential candidates Andrei Sannikov and Mikalai Statkevich and prominent opposition figures Dmitry Bandarenka and Pavel Sevyarynets.

Another criminal case that attracted much international attention was against the head of the human rights group *Viasna* [Ales Bialiatski](#). Bialiatski defended and supported victims of political repressions rights in Belarus for a very long time with support from international donors. Belarusian court found him guilty of "tax evasion" of the donor's money that he used for his activities.

Young activists [Zmicier Dashkevich](#) and Eduard Lobov were sentenced to two and four years prison terms correspondingly for allegeded involvment in an act of "malicious hooliganism". Authorities also imprisoned a regional businessman Mikalai Autukhovich for "illegal possession" of five bullets for a hunting gun. Vitsebsk opposition activist [Siarhei Kavalenka](#) was sentenced to three years of personal restraint after he hung out an old national flag on the New Year tree at the Victory square in Vitebsk. He is keeping a hunger-strike against his criminal prosecution since 20 December 2011 and may soon die as a result of it.

Recently several young anarchists were also criminally prosecuted, but not all Belarusian and international organisations recognise them as political prisoners. One of the most respected human rights organisation *Viasna* consider only Mikalai Dziadok, Igor Olinevich and Aliaksandr Franzkevich as proper political prisoners. At the same time it regards cases of Eugene Vaskovich, Artem Prokopenko and Pavel Syromolotov as properly criminal, but whose punishment is disproportionate to their guilt and thus is politically motivated. In October 2010 they threw petrol bombs into KGB headquarters in a small Belarusian town Bobruisk and then were

sentenced to seven years in a penal colony.

Political Prisoners or Just Criminals?

Belarusian authorities try to be innovative in the ways of political repression. They want political activists to look like dangerous criminals whose persecution is justified even in European countries. For example, in 2008 Hramada civil organisation activist Zmicier Lisienko was sentenced to 10 years in prison for illegal possession of drugs, and no human rights group in Belarus wanted to deal with this case in order not to be accused of helping drug criminals.

Finally, freshly-created group of human rights activists *Za Voliu!* claims that Aliaksandr Kruty and Aliaksandr Malchanau are also political prisoners in addition to above-mentioned 15 people. The former is accused of hooliganism against a doctor in Minsk and the latter is accused of a scrap metal theft. It appears that sometimes independent media portray usual crimes as politically motivated if a person has some link with the opposition. However, in most cases after careful consideration of facts human rights associations deny the political nature of such crimes.

Hostages in the Geopolitical Game

Many predict that the Belarus-EU "cold war" has to end, because it is not in the interests of either side. When Bulgarian foreign minister Nikolay Mladenov visited Alexander Lukashenka in Minsk at the beginning of September, it seemed as just another step towards the rapprochement scenario. As a result of it 21 political prisoners became free in August-October 2011, but then the process reached a deadlock once again.

A number of experts blame the new round of [generous Russian subsidies](#) which make dialogue with the West and release of political prisoners a less urgent task. Belarusian authorities can afford waiting for really beneficial offers from the EU

and United States.

The authorities still need good relations with Western countries to lessen their dependence upon Russia, improve their image in the world and [attract foreign investments](#). There is room for bargaining and hope for prisoners' relatives, but unfortunately it is difficult to expect quick improvements.