

Belarus: Government Cracks Down on Dissent

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To: Article



PRESS RELEASE

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London 22.12.10: ARTICLE 19 Condemns The Belarusian Government's Violent Crackdown On Peaceful Dissent And Freedom Of Speech In The Aftermath Of The Presidential Elections And The Arbitrary Detention Of Over 600 Peaceful Protesters.

Thousands of Belarusian citizens gathered at the Independence Square in Minsk on 19 December to protest against the violations observed during the election process. The Belarusian authorities violently dispersed the crowd and used disproportionate force against the demonstrators, opposition presidential candidates and journalists. Hundreds were beaten, including presidential candidates Vladimir Nekliaev, Vital Rymasheuski and Andrei Sannikov. The majority of those arrested during the demonstration have now stood trial for 'participation in an unsanctioned meeting.'

ARTICLE 19, together with other members of the Human Rights House Network, expressed their deep concern in an open letter to President Lukashenko on 21 December, calling on the government to immediately release journalists, human rights defenders and peaceful protesters from detention, and to stop further persecution of those arrested for peacefully expressing their opinion.

"ARTICLE 19 strongly condemns the arrests and beatings of journalists, human rights defenders and opposition candidates, and calls for their immediate release. We also urge the Belarus government to impartially investigate the incidents and bring the perpetrators of violence to justice," stated Agnes Callamard, Executive Director of ARTICLE 19.

Andrei Sannikov, the official runner up in the elections, and his wife Irina Khalip, a local correspondent for the Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta, were arrested while driving to a hospital after the demonstration. Another presidential candidate, Vladimir Neklyayev, also beaten during the demonstration, was dragged from his hospital bed and detained without explanation. Natalya Radina, the editor of *Charter'97*, also beaten, is currently one of 18 people reportedly charged with organising or participating in mass unrest, punishable with up to 15 years imprisonment, under Article 293 of the Belarusian Criminal Code.

The clampdown on media outlets such as *Charter'97* are an illustration of the systematic suppression and persecution of human rights defenders and journalists in Belarus, despite the Belarusian state's obligations to respect and promote human rights and promises to meet the European Union requirements.

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NOTES TO EDITORS:

- For more information please contact: Nathalie Losekoot, nathalie@article19.org or +44 207 324 2509.
- Copies of the joint letter to President Lukashenko may be found here:

<http://humanrightshouse.org/noop/file.php?id=15631>

• ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.

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