

Spotlight interview: Lyudmila Gryaznova

Freedom of Expression in Belarus: A case the international community must support

In a recent ARTICLE 19 interview Lyudmila Gryaznova (Chairperson of Human Rights Alliance and Vice-Chairperson of the United Civil Party), talked about the deteriorating conditions for freedom of expression in Belarus and set forth her conviction that the international community can and must help.

Profile: Lyudmila Gryaznova

As Vice-Chairperson of the United Democratic Party of Belarus, in 1994 Ms Gryaznova was elected MP to the Supreme Soviet. She was one of 70 MPs who signed the petition for President Lukashenko's impeachment in 1996. She was elected Deputy Chairwoman of the United Civil Party in 2003 and Chairperson of "Human Rights Alliance". She actively writes on political and social issues and has published over 150 articles in various newspapers and websites. On several occasions she has been a victim of administrative persecution and has been on trial for her political activities. In 2003 she was sentenced to 15 days in detention for organising public protests.

How would you describe the freedom of expression situation in Belarus?

It's generally very bad. Only a few independent media outlets are still operational, with their existence still under question. Starting from 2007 they will be excluded from the subscription catalogue, the catalogue through which newspapers are distributed in Belarus. As the case of *Narodnaya Volya*¹ showed, preventing the subscription is an effective method used by Lukashenka's authoritarian regime to suppress the independent media. The number of people who have access to the newspaper lessened, distribution on the streets is banned and, in some cases, distributors have been arrested.

The number of media outlets is constantly decreasing and the Internet remains the only alternative. Although the Internet at present is relatively free, the authorities are trying to monitor it. We believe they lack the technology to be able to do it successfully. But e-mails of NGOs, oppositional parties and media are being examined, that we know this for sure. This means that sometimes we have to travel outside the country to send an email to foreign partners.

There are international radio stations, of course, whose broadcasts are received in Belarus, for example Radio[Free Europe/Radio] Liberty in Belarusian and Russian. The Russian one is received better, so it would be better to increase the broadcasting of

¹ An independent daily that is being published in the Russian city of Smolensk and then transported to Minsk. The distribution of the paper was getting increasingly difficult, so the newspaper had to start an online version as an alternative.

Belarusian news on the Russian Radio Liberty. There are also Deutsche Welle, ERB, BBC and some others radio stations.

How can the freedom of expression situation in Belarus be improved?

The most desirable thing would be TV broadcasts from Europe to Belarus. Another priority is the independent Belarusian newspapers that still exist, independent radio stations, oppositional web-sites and other media that operate without censorship. It is important for the media to understand the issue of language in Belarus, where the majority of the population are Russian-speakers. A very fast shift from Russian to Belarusian does not promote good communication for the population. It is worth remembering 1994, when a campaign on 'belarusianisation' that was initiated by the Popular Front of Belarus and its leader Zenon Pozdnyak contributed to the victory of Alexander Lukashenka in the presidential elections.

What is the situation with freedom of information?

Generally Belarus is facing the same problems as other post-Soviet republics in this respect. However, the situation is even worse in Belarus, where journalists have been killed for many years now, the opposition has completely lost access to the electronic media, and independent newspapers are being closed by legal and economic methods. The same is happening in Russia now. Unfortunately, Belarus is used as a testing ground for these repressive policies and if government gets away with it here, they use the same tactics in Russia.

What are the conditions for NGOs under the new restrictions on receiving funds from abroad?

The situation worsened after December 2005, when new orders were issued and NGOs were accused of subversive activities against the state. Everyone remembers the case of 'Partnerstvo' (Partnership)² organisation that received funds from international or foreign organisations to observe elections and were prosecuted for it. NGOs are in a very difficult situation – receiving money from foreign donors means that they can be accused of promoting 'western interests', which is considered to be evidence of 'subversive activities against the state'. Thus, NGOs cannot work in Belarus officially or legally - they don't even have bank accounts in Belarus! It just doesn't make sense to try and work within the existing legal framework. If you do, you can be charged with anything from fraud to even terrorism.

Unfortunately, we [Belarusian civil society] are seen as Soviet dissidents. All international commitments are disregarded; NGOs are presented as western spies, spreading 'western politics', and unfortunately very often this has an impact on the opinions of the people. Ordinary people become suspicious of NGOs and their activities.

Of course there are also NGOs who are implementing 'harmless' projects, often funded by the state. For example the *Beliruskiy Respublicanskiy Soyuz Molodyoji* (Belarusian

² In March 2006, Belarus' KGB arrested, imprisoned, and brought charges against the activists of grassroots NGO Partnerstvo, Ms. Enira Bronitskaya, Mr. Nickolaj Astrejko, Mr. Timofej Dranchuk and Mr. Alexander Shalajko.

Republican Youth Union, BRYU) is an organisation that resembles Soviet times Komsomol³. The only difference is that we, when we were in Komsomol, knew it was not serious; we were sceptical about many things and many ideas. This one is more dangerous and much worse, because young people involved in the organisation are rather serious about its aims. It is not a game any more. With the help of BRYU the authorities try to control the political behaviour of youth. Members of BRYU may have advantages while entering universities, claiming campus accommodation and jobs. Today, those young people who think about their future careers cannot do without the blessing of BRYU.

What do you think international organisations can do to help Belarus?

If there wasn't such 'draconian' legislation in the country and if international obligations weren't ignored, then approaches and tactics would have to change. Along with support to independent media and oppositional parties, the international community can help us to revive the Belarusian intellectual elite. Representatives of these elite should be acknowledged by the international community, for example through support and awards that help to raise their profile within Belarus. This would also help keep the world's attention on Belarus and provide international pressure in support of freedom of expression. Take for example our famous writer Rygor Baradulin. I believe he should be awarded the Nobel Prize.

Do you mean like in the case of Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk or Iranian lawyer and human rights activist Shirin Ebadi?

Yes, absolutely. It would draw attention to Belarus and its problems, and it would encourage intellectual opposition. We need to promote the support for good literature, including literature that raises social and political issues. Basically, I would say western democracies should do what they were doing in the 1980s in the Soviet Union. Lukashenka is trying to confuse people and we need to combat that with values and reference points.

What would you expect from organisations like ARTICLE 19?

Campaigning, first of all. There are still so many issues. Alexandre Kazulin, presidential candidate on elections of 2006, who, together with Alexander Milinkevich, challenged Alexander Lukashenka during the last presidential election has been arrested and sentenced to five-and-a-half years. He is still in prison and has been on hunger strike for over a month. This is an unbelievable incident and international organisation should not forget things like this. ARTICLE 19 can also help through dissemination of information on Belarus. I understand it is not easy for international organisation to work in Belarus, but events can always be organised outside Belarus, in Poland or for example the Baltic countries.

³ Abbreviation from *Kommunisticheskiy Soyuz Molodiozhi* (Коммунистический союз молодёжи), or "Communist Union of Youth". The organization was established on October 29, 1918. Komsomol served as the youth wing of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Members were aged between 13 and 28.

What should be the EU's and western government's response to Belarus?

The worst thing is when they don't react at all. It gives Lukashenka the opportunity to do whatever he wants to. When the spotlight is on the country, when people abroad talk about us, it spawns hope and optimism for the future. The stick and carrot policy should be used. If Europe is opening up to Belarus, then there should also be some steps on the part of the [Belarusian] government. It should not just be ingratiation with the regime.

Again, the experience of the Soviet Union of the '80s can be very useful. Belarus represents a new form of dictatorship, so maybe there are no concentration camps, but there are other, more sophisticated measures that the regime employs to suppress those who disagree. Silencing of independent media and the manipulation of information are among the most dangerous.

What should be the role of western businesses in Belarus be? There are currently some major western investments in Belarus, and these business people are obviously working with the authorities. What do you think about that?

Of course it depends on the type of investment we are talking about. If they are private investments, then they cannot be managed by politicians. But if we are talking about western governments investing in Belarus, then they should remember that they are supporting a dictatorship. If human rights are declared a priority, then business interests should clearly come second.

Do you think it will be possible to influence Lukashenka's regime through pressure on Russia?

No, I don't think that scenario will ever work. Russia will never become a 'democratisator' for Belarus. We should realise that Russia is not a democratic state - it's clearly moving in exactly the opposite direction. On the contrary, as I already mentioned, Belarus is used to test repressive policies that are then implemented in Russia. So, the scenario that the world should try to democratise Russia and then Russia will in turn democratise its 'surrounding' is not very realistic.

I think, only now, after the killing of [Anna] Politkovskaya and the poisoning of [Aleksander] Litvinenko, the West is beginning to wake up to the realisation of what kind of country they are dealing with. Killings of politicians and 'disagreeable' journalists are not a new thing. Meanwhile, the world prefers to keep it 'civilised', I would say too civilised with these regimes.