

# Belarus

## EQUALITY AND NON-DISCRIMINATION

On 10 July, ahead of the August elections, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus again expressed increasing concern over the deteriorating human rights situation in the country, and the unwillingness of the government to implement previous UN recommendations.

## FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

Belarus continued making headlines for months, due to the brutal government crackdown waged against anti-government protesters. The protests broke out on 9 August, following the national elections, which Alexander Lukashenko, Europe's "last dictator", claimed to have won. It is estimated that over a million people have joined demonstrations since then to protest against rigged elections. On 16 August, the largest protest in the history of the country brought 200,000 people together in Minsk. The protests continued until the end of the year.

LGBTQI people and activists have participated in and supported the protests from the first day. Some have brought rainbow flags to the protests. LGBTQI activists warned that even if Lukashenko resigned, their fight would be far from over:

*"Being a peaceful protester these days in Belarus means to be a target of violence, to be terrorized, detained, attacked, beaten up, injured and murdered on the streets, or tortured in jail. But for my "pidor" ["faggot" in English, reclaimed by the community], that's nothing we're not used to. We've been fighting for our rights since before this election. We've been fighting for our rights ahead of this election. And we'll be fighting for our rights after this election." - Andrei Zavalei, queer activist in Politico*

*"LGBT people are calling for freedom. We are tired of living in a dictatorship where we simply didn't exist." - Anna Bredova, one of the rainbow flag bearers to the AFP*

Belarusian women have been key voices of dissent as leaders of the opposition, with thousands participating and hundreds detained in a wave of police brutality. Some have called the events "Belarus's female revolution".

Over the weeks of protests, thousands were unlawfully arrested and detained, several were tortured, sexually abused, beaten, kicked, and some were reported abducted and missing. These measures were condemned by UN, Council of Europe, and European Union leaders. The EU considered sanctions against

the country, but was blocked by Cyprus on 21 September. In October, Cyprus withdrew its veto threat. In September, the Moscow Mechanism of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) was invoked with regard to the violations and the resulting report was published in November.

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Uladzislau Valahovich, director of the anti-abortion organisation Open Hearts, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, and priest Andrei Lemeshonak launched a petition addressed to the Prime Minister to ban "LGBT propaganda", which gathered over 52,000 signatures. Similar initiatives happened in previous years. A number of orthodox priests distanced themselves from the petition. The Catholic Church supported this initiative and proposed to introduce criminal liability for "LGBT propaganda". In February, Archbishop Kondrusiewicz said that "homosexuality is curable with God's help".

The actions were followed by wide civil society criticism, including a coalition of human rights and LGBT organisations, the Belarusian Youth Council, and the Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, which unites over 70 groups.

## HEALTH

In February, Radio Liberty reported that the Ministry of Health was planning to ban LGBT "propaganda" and raise the age of consent from 16 to 18 for those engaging in same-sex relationships. No developments have happened since.

## HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

On 26 September, local LGBT+ activist Victoria Biran was arrested and placed under administrative detention for 15 days, on grounds of Article 23.34 of the Code of Administrative Offences for organising or holding mass events. Biran was on her way to the Minsk Women's March at the time of her arrest. While detained, the police told Biran to identify other LGBT+ activists from a list of names, which they later denied, saying they didn't know Biran was an LGBT+ activist herself. Biran, a prisoner of conscience, was eventually released on 11 October.

Several other LGBT+ rights activists were detained on 26 September. In Mogilev, Kanstantin Chernov was beaten up and unlawfully detained by three people dressed in black. Chernov was forced to strip naked at a police station. The police confiscated his materials on LGBT+ rights, called him "pidoras" [faggot], verbally insulted him, and said that "people like him needed to be killed". Chernov was later released, but fined



about 350USD, a month's worth of salary. Days later, Chernov's personal data and photo were leaked online.

Zhenya Velko, a trans man, was detained at the Women's March in Minsk and subjected to sexual and verbal abuse during his two-day detention. Zhenya was also told that people like him should be shot.

Two LGBT activists and bloggers were detained in November. Anton was released pending trial, and Denis was sentenced to 15 days. Feminist activist Svetlana Gatalskaya, a member of the MAKE OUT LGBTQ+ initiative, was also placed under administrative detention for 15 days.

## **PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC, CULTURAL AND POLITICAL LIFE**

In June, LGBT+ groups compiled a list of questions from the LGBT community to aspiring politicians, and published it as an open letter. Oppositional candidates faced severe repression after the publication of the list. None of the running politicians ended up including LGBT rights in their campaign.

## **SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS**

In June, the Open Heart organisation, known for its anti-LGBT rhetoric and focus on traditional family values, requested for the Ministry of Health to ban the display of condoms in stores, and make them available only in pharmacies.



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