

Are all equal before the law?

“All are equal before the law and have the right to equal defense... without any discrimination.” Article 22 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus

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Belarus - The Heart of Europe

The Republic of Belarus is situated in the center of Europe. The capital is the city of Minsk. Belarus borders on Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Russia and Ukraine. The territory of Belarus totals 207.6 thousand sq km. It stretches from west to east for 650 km and from north to south for 560 km. In comparison with other European countries, Belarus is slightly smaller than Great Britain and Rumania, 2.2 times as big as Portugal and Hungary and 5 times as big as the Netherlands and Switzerland.
Head of state: Alyaksandr Lukashenka
Head of government: Sergei Sidorsky
Death penalty: retentionist
International Criminal Court: not ratified

The clampdown on civil society continued. The number of convictions of civil society activists increased as legal changes limiting freedom of association introduced at the end of 2005 came into effect. Opposition activists were subjected to harassment and arbitrarily detained. Mass detentions of peaceful demonstrators took place after presidential elections in March. The government did not adequately protect women against violence in the home. Use of the death penalty continued. No progress was made in investigations into four cases of enforced disappearance. Violations of the rights to freedom of expression and assembly were repeatedly condemned by the international community. The Election Observation Mission of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe criticized the conduct of the presidential elections on 19 March. It found that "arbitrary use of state power and widespread detentions showed a disregard for the basic rights of freedom of assembly, association and expression". In conclusions passed on 10 April, the Council of the European Union (EU) criticized the elections and condemned the violence used by the Belarusian authorities against demonstrators and the arrests of demonstrators and members of the opposition. The EU instituted restrictive measures against 31 officials responsible for violations of international electoral standards and for the crackdown on civil society and democratic opposition. The list of officials against whom such restrictive measures would be applied was added to subsequently. On 18 May the EU froze the assets of President Lukashenka and 35 other officials.

Non-governmental organizations continued to face stringent controls and checks on their activities. A number of civil society activists were detained or

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charged under Article 193 of the Criminal Code which was amended in November 2005 to include a prison sentence of up to three years for "organizing and running an unregistered organization that infringes the rights of citizens".

Large numbers of peaceful demonstrators were detained and beaten by riot police and anti-terrorist forces during demonstrations following the March elections. According to the human rights group Vyasna, a total of 686 people were detained during the period 19-25 March. Most of those detained were charged with administrative offences, such as participation in unsanctioned meetings or hooliganism, which carry sentences of 10 to 15 days' detention.

Opposition activists were harassed and intimidated and increasingly sentenced for criminal offences in an attempt to discredit them. Eleven prisoners of conscience were held during the year.

According to press reports nine death sentences were passed during 2006. There was no official information on the number of executions carried out and death sentences imposed.