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Summary: Friday, 5 February to Friday, 12 February 2021

Political prisoners

On 9 February, the human rights community of Belarus added 11 new names to the list of political prisoners, and on 10 February, seven more. Thus, the total number of political prisoners in the country has increased to 246 people.¹

Freedom of expression

Pressure on freedom of speech continued this week, from the arrest of the administrators of the courtyard Telegram channels to the criminal trial against Belsat journalists for carrying out their professional activities.

Searches were conducted in the apartment of Mogilev journalist Alina Skrebunova. Both she and cameraman Alexander Sidorevsky were detained in the middle of the day for three hours, kept in the Leninsky District Department of Internal Affairs, and a protocol was drawn up under Art. 22.9 of the Administrative Code (working for foreign media without accreditation). All equipment was seized from her as part of the administrative case under Art. 22.9.²

The officers of the Ministry of Internal Affairs detained the administrator of the Telegram channels Gray Kot, Khata Belsat, and Denisovskaya.³

Belsat journalists Lyubov Luneva and Dmitry Soltan were detained and sentenced to administrative arrest this week.⁴

On 9 February, the Frunzensky District Court of Minsk began to consider the case of Daria Chultsova and Katerina Bakhvalova (pseudonym: Andreeva), two Belsat journalists who were streaming from the Square of Changes on 15 November. The journalists were charged under Part 1 of Art. 342 of the Criminal Code, "Organisation and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order, or active participation in them".⁵

Non-refoulement

¹ <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en>

² <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=267870&lang=ru>

³ <https://www.belta.by/special/incident/view/zaderzhan-administrator-dvorovyh-destruktivnyh-telegram-kanalov-427487-2021/>

⁴ <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=268020&lang=ru>

⁵ <https://news.tut.by/society/718084.html?c>

Belarus has become increasingly active in its inquiries to neighbouring states with requests for the extradition of people against whom politically motivated cases have been initiated in the country.

The Belarusian authorities have sent documents to Poland for the extradition of Stepan Putilo and Roman Protasevich.

The Investigative Committee sent documents to the Prosecutor General's Office to initiate an issue before Latvia on the extradition of the former head of the High Technologies Park and participant in the presidential election campaign, Valery Tsepkalo. As indicated in the message, he is accused "of a number of corruption crimes and receiving bribes on an especially large scale".⁶

The Prosecutor General's Office sent a request to its Russian colleagues to extradite the world kickboxing champion Alexei Kudin, in order to prosecute him. The criminal case against Kudin, under Part 2 of Art. 363 of the Criminal Code, is pending before the Molodechno District Court.⁷

Rights to peaceful assembly

The Belarusian authorities are trying to come up with new methods to fight mass peaceful Belarusian protests.

In Belarus, the Investigative Committee began to collect fines from the fined participants of the rallies, which were consequently paid by third-party organizations and individuals. This was reported on Belarus 1 TV channel, with reference to the Investigative Committee: "The Investigative Committee reports that multiple facts of financing illegal mass events have been established. For example, this is the payment of fines by third-party organizations and individuals for participants in rallies. Thus, the people against whom the administrative penalty was applied did not actually bear responsibility."⁸

All Belarusian People's Assembly and possible constitutional changes

The main news from the state authorities was the meeting of the All Belarusian People's Assembly this week. So far, this has not been about human rights, but it could be in future, since amendments to the constitution were discussed.

According to the draft, which was made available to journalists, the delegates of the All Belarusian People's Assembly will be asked to vote for giving the assembly a legislative status as "the highest form of people's representation", and by the end of the year, proposals will be developed to amend the constitution.

The published document proposes "to ensure the participation of broad strata of the population in the development and implementation of the most important directions of state

⁶ https://www.tvr.by/eng/news/obshchestvo/sk_provodit_rabotu_po_ekstraditsii_beglykh_belorusov/

⁷ <https://sport.tut.by/news/aboutsport/718404.html>

⁸ <https://news.tut.by/society/717829.html?c>

policy, recognising the All Belarusian People's Assembly as the highest form of people's representation with legislative consolidation of its special legal status."

In addition, a constitutional commission will be created, which will include representatives of government agencies, the legal community, various sectors of the economy, and the social sphere.

According to the resolution, the commission in 2021 will develop proposals for amending the constitution for subsequent submission to a national discussion and a republican referendum.⁹

Alexander Lukashenko announced that the new draft constitution will be finalised within a year.

"During this year, the draft constitution, the third in a row, will be ready, publicly discussed, and at the beginning of next year it will be submitted to a referendum," Lukashenka said. At the same time, he believes that Belarus should remain a presidential republic.

According to him, the All Belarusian People's Assembly should be a stabiliser for the transitional period and have constitutional powers. "We must have a clear safety net so as not to lose the country. It must be a stabiliser, an umbrella for the whole country for a certain period."¹⁰

⁹ <https://news.tut.by/economics/718535.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-nazval-glavnye-uslovija-svoego-uhoda-iz-vlasti-428236-2021>