



Information note

Subject	Repression of independent trade unions in Belarus	Date: 23 August 2017
For	Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, MFA, and CISU	Danish MEP's and MP's
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The following information has been collected by 3F, IndustriALL Global Union and IF Metall, Sweden, from the involved trade union activists in Belarus as well as from media sources¹.

August 2017 crack-down on independent unions in Belarus

On 2 August, between 09.15 and 09.30, two independent unions in Belarus were suddenly raided by the police. Several of the policemen were disguised as maintenance service staff. Both of the raided unions, REP (Radio and electronics workers' union) and BNP (Refinery and mine workers' union) are 3F's partners in the country. They are also – just as 3F -affiliates of IndustriALL Global Union.

Some ten people entered the office of REP union and presented a public prosecutor's warrant for the search of the union office. They broke the door to the office of the chief accountant, as there was no key provided at the time of the search. A similar search was carried out in Soligorsk office of the BNP.

The raids were coordinated and did not allow any of the trade union leaders to get in contact with each other. After searching the offices and private houses of union officials, the police seized computers, hard drives were removed, as well as notes, bank cards, English language material, phones, and other equipment. Trade union officials of both BNP and REP were detained and brought to police offices for interrogation.

The chief accountant of the REP union, Igor Komlik, was arrested. According to the public statement that appeared on the website of the State Control Committee of Belarus, Gennady Fedynich (chairman of REP) and Igor Komlik are both charged with tax evasion. According to the charges, the union leaders risk seven years of imprisonment and confiscation of their property. As long as the case is on-going he is barred from leaving the country e.g. for cross-border trade union activities.

We have no certain information about the accusations against BNP president Nikolai Zimin and accountant Snjezana Grintevich.

Natalia Pichuzhkina, union activist and former editor of the union website praca-by.info was also detained. She was taken for interrogation at 3 pm and not release until 10pm the same day, while Gennady Fedynich was only released on the early morning 3 August.

Igor Komlik was later transferred to the Okrestina detention centre and remains in custody to this day.

Background

This is the second major crack-down on independent civil society this year. The trade union REP has been active in defending workers' rights in Belarus for years. The union led a strong nation-wide campaign against the notorious presidential **decree 3** also known as "The decree on social parasites", penalizing the unemployed in Belarus. The campaign was conducted in

¹ Mainly <http://nn.by> and <http://www.industrial-union.org>

close cooperation with other major Belarusian human rights organisations such as Belarus Helsinki Committee and Vjasna.

Between March 5 and 13 a number of so called "preventive" detentions were carried out by the Belarusian authorities. The Belarusian police apprehended politicians and social group leaders who had said they would hold major protests scheduled for later in the month. Most of them were imprisoned just long enough for them to miss the rallies, demonstrations and protests. Bloggers and journalists covering the events were also apprehended; followed by a wave of arrests targeting the activists spreading the information about the protests. Finally, protesters were arrested at the actual demonstrations and rallies: more than 50 in Minsk on March 15 and 30, and more in other cities of the country. A number of REP and BNP activists and leaders were arrested. The most brutal crackdown took place on March 25, an unofficial holiday known as Freedom Day (Dzen' Voli).

The unusually strong protests were inconvenient for Lukaschenko and the regime's repressive acts caused widespread condemnation. Lukaschenko then announced that the unemployment tax would not be collected and the people who had already paid would be reimbursed, but that the decree would be implemented at a later unspecified time.



Igor Komlik (left) has been transferred to the Okristina detention centre, while both he and Gennady Fedynich are charged with tax evasion for personal accumulation of wealth.

The new actions of the authorities seem designed for halting the activities of the independent trade union movement in Belarus. The timing of the recent crack-down suggests a strong interest in preventing new civil protests. The day after raiding the unions, president Lukaschenko announced the enforcement of a practically unchanged decree for later this year.

International trade union protest

In May 2017 IndustriALL Global Union executives extended their strong support to their Belarusian colleagues fighting against forced labour and criminalization of dissent in Belarus. The global union organisations, IndustriALL and ITUC calls the recent attacks "interference in the internal affairs of the trade unions, which is a grave violation of ILO Convention No. 87 on Freedom of Association."

The global unions demand that the government "stops interference of state structures in the internal affairs of the REP and BNP unions and adopt urgent measures to ensure normal conditions for the work of trade union organizations in accordance with the obligations of the Republic of Belarus under ILO Convention No. 87." They call for the "immediate release of Igor

Komlik, to stop criminal prosecution of the leaders of the Belarusian trade union REP, and to remove all groundless accusations against them.” In the letter, IndustriALL and ITUC reserved their right to inform the International Labour Organization, European Union and other competent international institutions of the on-going violations.

Also, a number of human rights organisations (e.g. Belarus Helsinki Committee and Vjasna) have protested against the recent events.

Sanctions

The EU first imposed sanctions against Belarus in 2004, steadily extending them to more individuals and organisations following a series of flawed elections, strengthening Lukashenko and his parliamentary supporters’ power in successive landslide elections. In February 2016, EU ministers decided to lift most sanctions permanently, although they expressed they remained concerned with the situation of human rights in Belarus. Ministers also called on Minsk to abolish the death penalty and implement international conventions, guidelines and EU’s recommendations on democracy.

After discussing the matter with our IndustriALL colleagues and our sister organisation, REP, we agree that the best approach would be one of continuation of the closer relations between EU and Belarus but that a small obstacle – the case of the independent trade unions – should be removed to clear the way.

3F recommendations

3F urges Danish and EU diplomats to express deep concern about this case, to ask the Lukaschenko government for information and for the withdrawal of charges against trade unionists. The trade union officer Igor Komlik should be immediately released.

We think Denmark should urge other EU member states as well as the EU as a whole to demand protection of trade union rights, freedom of association, assembly and expression in Belarus.