

The Belarusian regime tightens control over the opposition and civil organisations

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On 4 July, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka signed a decree amending the regulations governing its citizens' exit from the Republic of Belarus. It states that a ban on leaving the country may be imposed on citizens who are under what is known as 'preventive supervision'. Under Belarusian law, the security organs can use surveillance on persons who may pose a threat to national security. In addition, the new amendment grants the KGB the right to add names to the database of citizens who are banned from leaving the country. As of 2007, these powers have also been shared by the Ministries of Justice, Defence and the Interior. Since this March, cases of arresting activists from opposition and social organisations on Belarus's borders with the EU have intensified. In an interview with the TV channel Russia Today, President Lukashenka said that his answer to the call from some Belarusian opposition leaders for tougher EU sanctions against Belarus would be to prevent them from leaving the country.

Commentary

- The ban on leaving the country is one of many forms of repression against activists from the Belarusian opposition and civil society organisations, and as such has already been employed for many years. The most frequent rationale for this restriction was ongoing criminal proceedings. However, since March this year there has been a significant increase in the number of opposition activists detained by the Belarusian border guard. This time, the most common reason given was to apply 'preventive supervision' to them, which raised objections from the victims that these provisions were being applied unlawfully.

- The new amendment formally permits the use of preventative surveillance as justification for a decision to prevent someone from leaving Belarus. Simultaneously, the broad definition of the grounds for using this surveillance (including as a threat to state security) offers almost unlimited possibilities for applying sanctions against opponents of the regime. Surveillance may cover even those citizens who have not yet committed any violations, and are only under suspicion regarding their activities.

- The new regulations are first and foremost a retaliation by the regime against those opposition politicians who have actively advocated the introduction and use of sanctions against the Belarusian government, and who have also harshly criticised the current situation in Belarus. Secondly, this is part of the policy which has been implemented since the end of 2010 of intimidating opponents and tightening control over society.

- The severity of this travel ban has been tempered by the possibility of uncontrolled crossing at the Russian/Belarusian border, brought about due to regulations as part of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. Moreover, despite Minsk's intensive efforts, Moscow is uninterested in introducing an integrated database of people banned from travel, and has refused to cooperate in this matter. Notwithstanding the possibility of circumventing the ban by crossing the border with Russia, everything indicates that it will continue to be applied to a wide extent, especially in the context of the upcoming elections to the Belarusian parliament scheduled for 23 September.